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OR, THE
Great Scout's Big Three
A ROMANCE OF
THE PONY RIDERS of the OVERLAND.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

"If Buffalo Bill had not just made a double run because Jess Jordan was killed, he'd make the ride, boys."

"Well, plucky as I admit Buffalo Bill is—and none but a liar would say he wasn't—

BUFFALO BILL SEIZED THE LARIAT AND WENT UP HAND OVER HAND.

he'll be glad enough to take advantage of his double ride not to go on this one, which will be sure death to the Pony Rider that starts on it."

"Don't be too sure of that, Ben Black, for I'll wager my pay as agent against yours as Pony Rider for one month, that if I asked Cody to go he'd do it."

"I'll take the bet."

"Good! You are witnesses, boys, of the bet, and I say Buffalo Bill will go."

"I say he won't, for he's got a heap of good sense, if he is the most daring rider on the trail."

"So say I, and he'd be a fool to go, for within the last month no less than five of us Pony Riders has gone under in some mysterious way, and it's giving Providence a slap in the face to risk a ride carrying, on this run, thousands of dollars, when we has a warning that the rider will never git through."

"Right you are, and here's the warning, Cap'n Starbuck. Let me read it over ag'in for the boys."

And the last speaker held up a paper, to read aloud the following, written in a bold, distinct hand:

"WARNING TO PONY RIDERS OF THE OVERLAND."

"Keep it a secret that this warning is given you, but take heed of it if you value your lives."

"It is known to the Cloven Hoofs, in some mysterious way, just when a Pony Rider carries money and valuable packages, and in each case he will be held up."

"If he attempts to ride the gantlet his death is certain."

"To convince you, I know that the next rider from Headquarter Ranch will carry a large sum in money on the Western Run."

"Let it be sent through under guard, or it will never get there."

"Heed this, for it is the advice of

"A FRIEND IN CAMP."

"There, you hear that, pards; and, though I don't believe there is a coward among the Pony Riders, not one will go through in the face of such a warning."

"Well, Jess Jordan went through last time?"

"Yes, Cap'n Starbuck, he went through, but he came in here feet first, for they killed him on the very trail we are now warned not to take."

"Well, boys, the Express has got to go through, and I'm not allowed to send an escort."

"If I had to guard the Pony Riders, I would have to write the Overland Pony Rider Company that the service did not pay, and it would be given up— Ah! there comes Buffalo Bill now. In spite of his double ride he is on time to the minute," and as the agent spoke, all eyes were turned down the trail, which led along through a valley between two mountains.

There they saw, a couple of miles away, just passing around the base of one of the mountain spurs, a small dark object.

A closer look revealed a horse and rider, and they were coming on like the wind.

As they drew nearer it could be seen that the horse was stretched out at full speed, his red nostrils dilated, and the rapid rattle of his hoofs reached the ears of the group of men who were watching his approach. A stream of dust, left in the trail behind, followed him like a trail of smoke.

Nearer and nearer he came, and when close up to the camp the rider became visible.

He was riding erect in the saddle, his heels now and then under the flanks of his horse, to keep him at the mad pace, and his long, dark hair streaming out behind him in the wind like a veil.

He was a tall, slenderly-formed man, with a splendid physique, broad shoulders, and a face that was strikingly handsome, and, in spite of his wild life and deadly calling it bore the stamps of perfect refinement.

He was dressed in an embroidered flannel shirt, buckskin leggings stuck in the top of high cavalry boots, armed with silver spurs, and had on his head a slouch hat encircled by a silver cord and looped up on one side

with a pin representing a miniature Pony Rider.

Another moment he had dashed up and was greeted with a cheer, while Captain Starbuck called out:

"Buffalo Bill, as Jess Jordan was killed, and there has been a warning of sure death sent in to the Pony Riders, if they make the run westward, I can get no one to go on, and—"

"I will go, sir, and take the chances," was Buffalo Bill the Pony Rider's prompt response.

CHAPTER II.

THE PONY RIDERS.

THE Pony Riders of the Overland have won a place in history, romance and poetry, and deservedly so, for no braver set of men ever faced death.

Carrying the mail and Express through the then untrodden country of the far West, from the end of railroad travel from the East, to the California terminus eastward, they rode through what was literally a wild West.

Their paths were unbroken and their way led through mountain fastnesses, valleys, canyons, over plains, across rivers, and everywhere the danger to face of wild beasts, and the still more dreaded redskin.

As civilization pushed westward, they had the fear before them of Mormon foes, for there were men among the followers of Brigham Young ever ready in those days to strike a blow at the Gentiles who invaded a country they called their own by right of first possession.

With the advance westward of brave pioneer settlers, there also hovered about them a wild set of men who, flying from justice for crimes committed, were seeking to hide themselves in the wilderness, and still do red deeds that would send them to the gallows if caught.

There were adventurers of all kinds and classes, men and women, too, and they were seeking to find homes and fortunes in the Wild West.

Of course, too, there was a large element of outlawry among all this class of people, this mingling of many nations, and the army of Uncle Sam, with the Indians to keep in check and the outlaws, had all that it could do.

Situated in Utah, was the last general headquarters westward, of the Pony Express Company.

Beyond that point, the scene where my story opens, and known as Pony Riders' Ranch, there were only small stations or corrals, held by from one to three men, and where were kept the relay horses for the riders, situated every fifteen to twenty miles apart, according to the nature of the country.

These corrals were generally built as strong as forts, where the men could stand a short siege against any ordinary force of Indians.

At the headquarters, Pony Riders' Ranch, fully thirty riders were kept for an emergency, a couple of hundred horses, and the stock-tenders, with an agent and his assistant.

About the place had gathered a small settlement, half a dozen farmers, as many more cattle-men, a score of miners who were looking for gold in the adjoining mountains and some hangers on who did not do much of anything.

There were the Overland Riders' shops, a store, a public house, for travelers sometimes went through under an escort, and the typical frontier saloon and gambling den.

The Overland Company's quarters were apart from the settlement, but the store-keeper and gambling den always were well patronized by the riders when pay-day came around.

Such was the place where the scene of my story opens, and the group of Pony Riders introduced to the reader were a dashing, gallant set of young men, wild fellows perhaps, rough riders, but with big, fearless hearts and noble natures.

Among the riders on the Overland were, at that time, men whose names have gone into history as heroes.

Most prominent among them was Buffalo Bill*, and there were also his pards Wild Bill† and Pony Bob.‡ the three known as the most reckless riders on the trail, and whose adventures in the discharge of their duties had been most thrilling, perilous and numerous.

Of late the outlaws along the Overland Trail, and the Indians too had been most active, while it was said that the Mormon Danites were also doing all they could to break up the brave riders' band that so boldly penetrated their country.

Five of the riders had been taken from the list within a month, either killed, or had mysteriously disappeared.

One of these had disappeared, and with him a large sum of money that he carried, and many asserted that he had skipped off with it.

But this Buffalo Bill and the other riders stoutly denied. They all asserted that the outlaws or Indians had captured him.

In the face of these fatal happenings, the riders had become very nervous about going on the Western run out of Pony Riders Ranch.

Jess Jordan had come in mortally wounded, and when he reported that the band of outlaws known as the Cloven Hoofs had held him up, but he had run the gantlet under fire, he fell from his saddle a dead man.

Buffalo Bill at once volunteered to finish the run for him, and dashed off on a ride of forty miles and back, as he would have had to go out on the next ride westward.

Shortly after his departure the riders had found tacked up on their cabin door, the warning that one of the men read aloud, and as the riders to the west had all met with mishaps, Captain Starbuck had called for a volunteer to take the Express through, and which he had been notified ahead would be very valuable.

Not a rider, in the face of that mysterious warning, had volunteered until Buffalo Bill came in from his double ride and at once had said:

"I will go!"

CHAPTER III.

FOUND IN THE TRAIL.

WHEN Buffalo Bill came out so promptly with his offer to make the desperate ride, breaking in upon Captain Starbuck the superintendent, before he finished his sentence, there was a cheer from the group of Pony Riders, from all but one.

The exception was the rider, Rocket Rob, who had bet his month's pay with the agent, that Buffalo Bill would not make the ride.

He looked very serious, while his comrades, who were all most willing to have bet as he did, mentally congratulated themselves that they had not done so.

"There's no telling what Buffalo Bill won't do," said Jockey Jack.

"Remember, Cody, I do not ask this of you; I only tell you the situation and call for a volunteer," said the agent.

"And I have volunteered, sir."

"Here, Jack, read the warning," called out the agent.

The warning was again read aloud, and Buffalo Bill said quietly:

"That does not change my determination, captain, for I knew what the danger was before."

"I will get dinner, take my horse Red Devil, and be off, and if I am a little behind schedule time it can't be helped as I am doing extra work."

"You'll be behind, Buffalo Bill, until eternity, for you'll never get there," Rocket Rob averred.

"Then I'll give you a chance to win back what you lost just now with the agent, for I'll bet you a month's pay I go through, yes, and on time, too!"

"I'll take the bet," cried Rocket Rob, brightening up, while Jockey Jack said:

"For shame, Rocket Rob, betting on a comrade's life."

* General W. F. Cody, who is too well known the world over, to need any introduction here.

† James H. Hickok—famous as scout and guide. He was killed in Deadwood by Jack McCall a few years ago.

‡ Robert Haslam, a famous Pony Rider. Now with the firm of Osborne & Son of Chicago.—THE AUTHOR.

"Declare it off," cried several voices; but Buffalo Bill said, in his calm way:

"The bet stands. If I go under, Captain Starbuck, pay Rocket Rob a month's pay out of what I have coming to me."

"Now, Juniper, get my horse Red Devil for me, while I look up some dinner," and Buffalo Bill hastened over to the "grub cabin."

In ten minutes he came back and found the splendid but vicious bay horse awaiting him, and held by the stock-tender Juniper.

"The bags are on, Bill; and remember, they are worth thousands. It's a big sum this time."

"Good-by, and God bless you!" said the agent, grasping his hand.

With a bound Buffalo Bill was in the saddle, the assembled Pony Riders gave a cheer and Red Devil tore loose from Juniper and was off at race-horse speed.

Buffalo Bill had ridden Red Devil on account of his remarkable speed, his ugly temper, which made him fight any one who barred his way, and because, if he wished to run by any one of the relay stations, the horse could readily stand the task, for the beast possessed wonderful staying powers.

Every one at the riders' headquarters were afraid of Red Devil, Juniper being the only stock-tender whom he would let come near him, though with Buffalo Bill he was as docile as a lamb, and would follow him like a dog.

Away sped Red Devil, fleet as a bird, along the Pony Trail, his rider sitting upright in the saddle, his face stern, but determined, and his eyes bent searchingly on the way ahead, to detect any sign of danger.

One good thing about Red Devil was that he could climb and descend a steep mountain like a mountain sheep; he would go where his master bade him; and he could swim well and fast, and was always fond of the sport, for sport it seemed to him.

Time and again the horse had saved Buffalo Bill when in a tight place; hence he had been selected that day, when the danger ahead seemed so great.

Buffalo Bill realized fully his danger. He knew that the warning sent in had not been an idle one.

Who had sent it he did not know, but it was certain that the Pony Riders had some friend in camp, and the danger was from the Cloven Hoofs and not the Indians.

The Indians wanted to kill for revenge, the outlaws for gold.

The daring rider who had accepted the alternative in the face of the warning, felt that he was doing his duty, and trusted to his proverbial luck and experience to get through in safety.

With death staring him in the face he was perfectly calm, and ready to meet what was before him.

So on sped Red Devil, casting mile after mile behind him.

The first relay was reached, and he simply drew up to call out:

"I'll make no change of horse here, pards."

"Don't go on, Bill, 'cause there's something wrong," cried one of the stock-tenders.

But Buffalo Bill did not heed if he heard, and Red Devil was flying on as before.

Several miles from the station, while running through a valley, Buffalo Bill drew rein suddenly.

He saw just in the trail a stick driven, and in the top, which was split, was a slip of paper.

He sprang from his saddle, pulled up the stick and threw it to one side, while he read what was written on the paper, and in the same hand of the warning.

It was as follows:

"If any rider dares the trail in face of the warning given, it will be Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, or Pony Bob."

"To the one who makes the ride, I bid him look to the left, half-way up the mountain, for he will see there one who will guide him around the trap set for him."

"A FRIEND IN CAMP."

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS GUIDE.

BUFFALO BILL stood like one in a quandary.

He knew the country pretty well, for when not riding Pony Express he had been hunting Indians or game, and did not know that a flank movement could be made at that point and the trail regained.

He knew that the hills on each side ran along for miles in an unbroken cliff from thirty to a hundred feet in height.

The trap set for him must be at the head of the valley, some six miles ahead, where the two mountain ranges that formed the vale met almost, being divided by a canyon only a hundred yards in width, and through which a small river ran, the trail following its banks.

Beyond this pass, half a score of miles, was the next relay station, where he must leave Red Devil, as he would have had a run of over thirty miles.

These thoughts flashed rapidly through the mind of the handsome and daring Pony Rider, after he had read the note found in the trail, and then he turned his eyes to the left, upon the mountain-side.

There, a third of a mile away, he saw where the cliff jutted out like the huge prow of a boat, and it was devoid of undergrowth upon the top.

But, there on the bold cliff, Buffalo Bill beheld that which surprised him—a horse and rider.

Without a moment's hesitation he leaped into his saddle, wheeled his horse out of the trail and rode across the valley at a long, swinging lope.

The river ran at the base of the cliff; but in the stream Red Devil plunged, and, a moment after, stood dripping on the other side just under the shadow of the jutting rock spoken of.

Looking up Buffalo Bill could see no one, but a voice called out:

"You are Buffalo Bill, the one I feared would risk the ride in spite of my warning."

"A Pony Rider must not shrink duty because danger lies in his trail."

"This is not a risk; it is certain death."

"Who are you?"

"It matters not so that I am here to save you."

"That is the very reason I am more anxious to know."

"You will not know, for my identity must remain a secret."

"Sufficient let it be that I save you."

"How can you, for this cliff could not be scaled by a mountain sheep."

"No, but by a man, yes."

"I will not desert my horse."

"See here, Buffalo Bill, you must know that, at the pass ahead, there is a deadly ambush laid for you."

"It is known that you carry a large sum of money, over fifty thousand dollars, going through to California. Your life is nothing compared with the desire to get the treasure."

"Then, too, you are more feared by the Cloven Hoofs, and the worst hated of any of the riders, as you have outwitted them so often, have killed several of the band, and are always hunting them when you are not riding Express."

"Now I wish to aid you to escape, if you will trust me and do as I tell you."

"All right! Go ahead!"

"But that is a woman's voice."

"No matter, whether man or woman, I can save you, if you will pledge yourself to obey me."

"I will."

"I am glad, for you are too brave a man to be shot down like a wild animal when you are doing your duty—shot by those who are outlaws and the hunters of their fellow-men."

"You are on the right trail there; but, I am losing time."

"The trail I will lead you by will cut off five miles, so the delay will thus be made up."

"Good!"

"Now ride along the cliff for a few hundred feet and you will come to a fissure in the rocks."

"A horse can enter it, and a spring is there, a basin among the rocks; also grass and timber."

"You will find a sapling cut down there, and arranged as bars to stop up the opening, so you can turn your horse loose there, and

he will be all right, for there is a spring, and grass enough to feed him for weeks."

"When you have unsaddled him, look up and you'll see me on the cliff above, forty feet over your head."

"I will lower a lasso, to which tie your saddle and bridle, and I will draw them up."

"Then I will lower it for you, and you will have to climb it to the top of the cliff, where it is fast to an overhanging tree."

"I can do it."

"When you reach the cliff you will find a horse there, so saddle and bridle him, and follow me, for I will be a hundred yards away. But, remember; you are not to approach nearer to me than that."

"That's too bad, but I will obey."

"I feel that you will, for I have your promise."

"When mounted, follow me, and I will guide you into the Pony Trail six miles beyond the pass where certain death awaited you if you had gone on, and where there will be an ambush for you until it is discovered by the outlaws that you are flanking them."

"Now go to the basin and hide your horse."

CHAPTER V.

THE UNKNOWN.

BUFFALO BILL was certainly impressed with the one who had come to his rescue, and did just as he was told.

He rode along the cliff, on the narrow way between it and the river, until he came to where the trail seemed to end at a clump of pines that grew out of the crevices of the rocks, and were dwarfed in size.

But peering through them he saw a break in the rocky wall, so pushed his way on until he came out into a very narrow pass.

It seemed as though some throe of nature had split the cliff there, the break widening as it went back into the mountain for a few hundred feet, and then abruptly ended.

But a spring flowed from beneath the rock there, earth and trees had slipped down from the heights above and formed a soil on the bottom of the basin thus formed, and it was as secure a retreat as one could wish.

The whole place was carpeted with rich grass, the sides were sheltered by trees, and through the basin ran the little rivulet from the spring.

By the pass Buffalo Bill found some freshly-cut bars, from saplings, and thrown down from the heights above.

With them he quickly made a barrier across the pass, that even Red Devil could not break down.

Then he let his horse go free, and taking his saddle and bridle, walked to the head of the basin.

There he found, hanging over the cliff and fast to a tree that grew there, and the limbs of which extended over, a couple of lariats twisted together.

At once tying his saddle and bridle to it, he paused a minute, and then, with a smile, made his saddle-bags, which seemed well filled, also fast, and called out:

"Haul away! All fast; and the saddle-bags are there too."

He smiled again as he patted a buckskin vest he wore, made to carry packages in it, and where he had the money in safety.

"If the Unknown does not skip off, thinking the money is there, then I can certainly trust him or her, or whatever my friend up there may be," he muttered.

Immediately he saw a hand stretch out over the cliff, but it was gloved, and he could not tell whether it was white, black or red.

It seized the lariat and then began to draw up the saddle, bridle and Express-bags, which were simply stuffed with paper and locked, the mail and treasure package being in the buckskin jacket.

"All right! Now you come up!" called the Unknown from the cliff above, and down dropped the end of the double lariat.

Quickly Buffalo Bill seized it and went up, hand over hand.

He swung from the limb over on the cliff, and coiling the lariat, left it there.

But he was not quick enough to catch the Unknown, whom he saw seated upon a fine horse and awaiting him a hundred yards distant, while there, near the cliff fastened to a

stake-rope, he discerned a dark bay horse that looked like a very superior animal.

His saddle, bridle and the Express-bags were there at his feet; the mysterious Unknown had not run off with them.

Quickly saddling the horse, and throwing the bags across the saddle, Buffalo Bill mounted and rode off at a gallop after the Unknown, who had already set the pace.

Away sped the guide along the top of the ridge, Buffalo Bill keeping the required distance behind.

Thus miles were gone over; but at length the Mysterious Guide halted, holding up a hand for the Pony Rider to do the same.

"Follow this canyon down the mountain and it will lead you to the Pony Trail. On your return leave the horse where you found him."

"In the future heed my warning."

Without a word more, without waiting for a reply, the Unknown wheeled suddenly and darted away along the ridge.

"Well, if that is a man or woman, white, black or redskin, there is no indication of it from the dress."

"The voice strikes me as being that of a woman, though it may be disguised."

"I didn't even have time to express my thanks," and Buffalo Bill looked after the horse and rider with deepest interest.

He saw a wiry, long-bodied black horse, and the rider, from head to foot was clothed in black, the robe, for such it was, falling on each side of the animal and completely hiding the saddle, if there was any.

Bridle there was none, and the rider guided the horse only with a long black lance.

The face of the rider was masked, the hands gloved, and thus was the Unknown wholly concealed.

When the black horse and sable-clad rider had disappeared from sight, Buffalo Bill rode on down the canyon, and after going half a mile came out of the thick underbrush right upon the Pony Trail and some ten miles from the point where he had left it and several from the pass where was the deadly ambush he had been warned against.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE PONY RIDER'S TRAIL.

BUFFALO BILL halted, as he struck the trail, took out a handsome watch, presented to him by the Pony Express Company, for valuable services rendered by him as a rider, and said:

"I am within five minutes of being on time at this point."

"This looks like a good horse my unknown friend in camp has furnished me with, and I can reach the next relay on time, if I push him, though I am beginning to feel the tear of my long ride in the saddle."

"But never mind the wear of human machinery if the company keeps its contract."

With this he set his horse going, and was glad to find out that he was as fleet as he looked. It carried him along at a tremendous pace.

Glancing again at his watch the Pony Rider saw, as the relay station came in sight, that he was ahead of time, with a few minutes to spare!

The stock-tender there was a peculiar character known as Silent Sam, the Hermit, from the fact that he preferred to occupy his post alone; took care of the relay horses without aid, never went to the ranch for supplies, but had his provisions brought to him by a special rider each month.

Then, too, he never spoke save when it was necessary to do so, and answered only in the shortest manner possible when addressed.

He dressed always in buckskin, wore a slouch hat, always pulled down over his eyes, and looked like a man out with the world and humanity in general.

Silent Sam the Hermit was seated upon a bench in front of his cabin, a pipe between his lips.

The cabin was small, as strong as a fort, and nearly blocked the entrance to a canyon that widened into a valley beyond, and which was a beautiful spot, with grass, a lake and meadow land, while the surrounding hills were too steep to admit of a horse escaping from the natural corral.

The trail led close by the cabin, which had a massive stockade wall running in front of it.

Suddenly Silent Sam started, for the rattle of hoofs came to his ears.

Nearer the sound came, and springing to his feet the stock-tender ran back of the cabin, lassoed one of several horses there, and returned to the trail to find Buffalo Bill standing by the side of his panting horse.

"I caught you napping, did I, Sam?"

"No."

"Well, you were not ready for me, that is certain, but I'm several minutes behind."

"My clock's wrong."

"Set it with my watch then, for I regulate the sun."

"Did you have any trouble on the trail?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I seen strange men pass here."

"How many?"

"Five."

"Who were they?"

"Don't know."

"What did they look like?"

"Outlaws."

"Did they stop?"

"No."

"Speak to you?"

"No."

"Then I can swear you didn't speak to them, for next to a dead man you have as little to say as any human being I ever struck."

Silent Sam made no reply but went on with his work of changing the saddle from one horse to another.

At last he said:

"New horse?"

"Yes."

"Never on run before?"

"No."

"Good runner?"

"Yes."

"You carry big money this run?"

"Who said so?" Buffalo Bill demanded, breaking into his determination to answer as Silent Sam did.

"Jess Jordan said it was expected."

"Poor Jess! They did for him; but, some day there will be a reckoning along this trail and every Pony Rider will be avenged," said Buffalo Bill earnestly.

"Hope so."

"Well, I'm off, Silent Sam. Some time I hope to catch you asleep to see if you do not do your talking then," and away bounded the well-trained pony the moment Buffalo Bill leaped into the saddle.

It was a run of fifteen miles to the next relay station and it was reached ahead of time, though the rider was more tired than the horse.

Another mount was ready for him, and the three men at the station all warned Buffalo Bill to keep his eyes open, as horsemen which they were sure were members of the band of Cloven Hoofs, had passed the day before.

Once more mounted upon a fresh horse, Buffalo Bill sped along for the next relay, twenty miles distant.

Night fell before he had gone five miles, but he still flew on, unmindful of the darkness and the rugged trail.

At the next relay his horse was ready. The men there had seen nothing of a suspicious nature; so, on the rider sped for the next relay, which was fifteen miles distant and the end of his run.

Just midnight he dashed up to the cabin of stock-tender "Gentleman George," and finished his wonderful run on time.

CHAPTER VII.

"GENTLEMAN GEORGE."

THE terminus of the westward run for one rider from Headquarters Ranch was seventy-five miles from the last station.

This was the run of Jess Jordan, who had been killed by the outlaws on his last ride over the trail.

Buffalo Bill's ride was to take the Express brought in by Jess Jordan, on its eastward run, one hundred miles, and return with the west-bound Express.

It was on the run of Jordan that most of the lawless acts had been committed against the Pony Riders, he having taken the place of a rider who had been killed and robbed.

That rider had also taken the place of one who had most mysteriously disappeared, as had several others before him, neither men nor horses having ever come in, and in each case considerable money was known to have been carried by them.

Thus it was that when Jess Jordan did not appear on time, Buffalo Bill had volunteered to go out in search of him.

He had found the dead body of the rider just beyond Silent Sam's station, a bullet through his breast.

That he had been murdered for robbery was certain, as the Express and mail were gone, his pockets were emptied, his belt of weapons were missing, while his horse was feeding near.

Buffalo Bill strapped the body on his own horse and rapidly rode back over the trail to Headquarters Ranch.

Then he mounted a fresh animal and made the ride over his own run to report Jordan's death, and the loss of the Express, and to return with the westbound bags.

It has been seen that, in spite of his ride after Jess Jordan, he returned on time, not having taken his allotted rest at the other end of his run.

Then he had promptly started on with the Express, notwithstanding the warning letter received.

When, therefore, he drew up at the station of which Gentleman George Ross was in charge, he had made within forty hours, a ride of over three hundred miles, with as many as twenty-two different mounts.*

The station of Gentleman George was also situated at the entrance to a valley that nature had surrounded with a fencing of rock, and thus the horses had a large pasture land to run over, with no fear of escape, as the cabin guarded the entrance.

At this station but two persons dwelt, George Ross and his daughter.

The man had gained the name of Gentleman George on account of his very courteous bearing toward all with whom he came in contact.

That he was a man of education, and had been reared in refinement, all knew, and that was all that was known of him.

He was a handsome man of fifty, and of fine physique, while he was possessed of undaunted courage and great strength.

He wore his hair long, it falling below his shoulders, and it was silvery white, while his full beard was dark and had not a gray hair in it.

The voice of George Ross was low and mellow, and even when he had been brought face to face with desperadoes and the deadliest danger, he had never forgotten his politeness.

Two years before, when on his way west with his daughter, as passengers in a stage coach, it had been held up by road-agents; but George Ross was not one to submit to being robbed of his earthly possessions. He shot the leader of the robbers dead, wounded two others, and, as the driver had been killed, he took the reins and brought the coach in to the next station.

It transpired that he saved for the company a large sum of money, and when asked by the superintendent what reward he asked, his reply had been that he wished a position in some capacity where he could live with his daughter and farm a small place.

Thus had George Ross been given the position of stock-tender at Valley Farms.

A good cabin had been erected for him there, and he had cultivated a few acres of land in the valley, raised cattle and cared for the cowboys' horses.

His home was a strange one for that far-away land, for he had made for it good furniture; he had brought with him overland household effects, and among them were books, pictures a guitar and violin, for he and his daughter were wont to play well together.

Once the Indians had made an attack upon him, but the reception they received sent them off minus several of their number; while, visited by several outlaws one day, who attempted to forcibly take the horses from the corral, he showed that he was not

* An actual fact. During the time when he was Pony Express Rider, and afterward as a scout, Buffalo Bill made some of the most remarkable rides on record.—THE AUTHOR.

afraid of men of their stripe and was fully capable of protecting his own.

As for Lena Ross, his daughter, she was a girl of wondrous beauty of face and form, and with all the gentleness of a refined woman, possessed pluck and determination to hold her own under the most trying circumstances.

She could ride like an Indian, throw a lariat with great skill, could hit dead center with rifle and revolver, and was not afraid of man or wild beast.

She had the endurance of a Pony Rider, was a skilled cook and good housekeeper. She could sing divinely, and play the guitar and violin with great skill.

The Pony Riders all along the Overland Trail had heard of her beauty, her deeds of daring, and accomplishments, and those who had not fallen in love with her had their affections centered elsewhere.

But to one and all Lena Ross was the same frank-hearted, gentle girl, showing no preference and was ever ready to do a kind act to any one.

Like her father, she seemed to love their wild life of seclusion, of exile from the life they had known, and be happy in their frontier home, while the thought of fear seemed to be a stranger to them.

Such was Gentleman George, the stock-tender, and such was his lovely daughter, whom the Pony Riders had named Little Sunbeam.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CRY FOR HELP.

"Ah, Mr. Cody, you have made the ride through in poor Jordan's place?"

"It took a plucky man to ride the trail, as I hear the Cloven Hoofs are all along the line, and I am surprised that you got through."

"I saw no Cloven Hoofs, Gentleman George, save a herd of deer," responded Buffalo Bill.

"You were fortunate, for one of the men from the stations east and west of me were here during the day and told us of Jordan's death, and that the Cloven Hoofs had pinned a note on his body that the riders were to be shot at sight if they refused to halt when ordered."

"Yes, they did do that, for I took the body in. Then I went on my own run east, and have now come here and on time, so I am very tired."

"Have you made such a ride as that, Buffalo Bill, and within forty hours?"

"Yes, and I may add that I'm awful hungry, so I suppose I can get a bite?"

"Oh, yes, for Lena always keeps a good supper for the midnight comers, who must eat here, as you know."

"The rider from the west is an hour overdue, and we were anxious about him, so Lena has not retired."

"Who is he, Mr. Ross?"

"Buck Renshaw."

"A good man, and hard rider. It is strange that he is overdue," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, strange, indeed. I do hope no harm has befallen him."

"So do I."

"Now come in and have some supper, and maybe he'll arrive, meanwhile—back, you savage brutes, for this is no Cloven Hoof or redskin," and Gentleman George addressed the last remark to half a dozen huge and fierce dogs, half bloodhound, half mastiff, and who were feared by even the Pony Riders who visited the little house.

They obeyed their master at once and slunk away to the stockade gate as though to wait for some one whom they could interview.

"You have a lot of splendid sentinels and guards, there, George—yes, and your house is as strong as a fort."

"Yes, Mr. Cody, those dogs are as savage as tigers toward all save Lena and myself, and it is well my house is a fort, as it may be besieged at any time, though Lena and I could stand off a small army of Indians, and a score or two of outlaws; but walk in—Lena, here is Mr. Cody. He is riding for poor Jess Jordan."

They had entered the cabin, which had five rooms in it, two on either side of a wide hall, and one in the rear, which was kitchen and dining-room combined.

The two rooms on one side of the hall were the sleeping-rooms of the father and daughter, and on the other side a parlor and spare bedchamber for belated Pony Riders.

The cabin was built of stout hewn logs, and had a flat roof, encircled by a breast-work of timber, behind which the stock-tender could crouch and sweep the approach up and down the trail, and in front, for a long distance, and the rear was protected by the wall of cliff that surrounded the valley.

Within the house there was an appearance of comfort not looked for in that wild land any more than would be the beautiful girl who came forward to greet Buffalo Bill with the air of a society belle.

"I am glad to see you, Buffalo Bill"—Lena Ross always called the Pony Riders by the name their comrades did.

"But I am sorry your coming was made necessary by the death of Jess Jordan, for he was a noble fellow."

"Yes, but like a soldier, Little Sunbeam, he died with his face to the foe, and in the discharge of his duty," and Buffalo Bill gazed with admiration upon the slender, perfect form, darkly bronzed face, and wondered what strange combination of circumstances had caused that girl and her noble-looking father to exile themselves in that habitation, far from civilization.

"Yes, I expected that of him, and I supposed you would be put on this run in his place?"

"And why, Miss Lena?"

"Well, few other men would dare ride it now; but you look tired, and must be hungry, so sit down and have some supper, for I have fish, quail, and venison steak, with potatoes, hot biscuit and coffee."

Buffalo Bill knew well what a meal at Valley Farm Station was, as the stock-tender raised vegetables, and had his own chickens, ducks, turkeys, hogs, and cows which gave plenty of milk.

Lena was always glad to set a good meal before an always-hungry Pony Rider, and, expert fisherwoman and huntress that she was, she kept the table well supplied.

Gentleman George then told his daughter of the ride Buffalo Bill had made, and she complimented him upon his endurance and pluck, and said:

"I am glad that Buck Renshaw is late, for it gives you a longer rest before starting back."

"Will you not take a short nap until he comes?"

But ere Buffalo Bill could reply there was a warning note from one of the dogs without, and springing to the door the stock-tender cried:

"Here comes Renshaw now."

Even as he spoke there was heard a shot, then another and another, and then a voice cried:

"Help! Gentleman George, Help!"

CHAPTER IX.

A FIGHT AGAINST ODDS.

GENTLEMAN GEORGE had a regular arsenal in his cabin.

The hallway was the place where he kept his weapons, and then under each one was a shelf containing the ammunition for that particular weapon.

There were a pair of crossed sabers, four muskets with bayonets fixed, an elephant gun, double barreled and capable of firing a score of slugs.

Then there were shot-guns, rifles and revolvers, in fact the "arsenal" counted up a score of firearms, all ready for use.

As in riding Pony Express the rider was wont to "fly light" as they expressed it, they never carried more than a pair of revolvers, and frequently only one.

So, when the call for help came from outside, Gentleman George called out:

"Take that repeating rifle, Cody, and come on!"

At the same time he seized a rifle himself while Little Sunbeam did the same.

Out of the cabin they all dashed, and at the gate were the half dozen savage dogs baying ferociously.

Throwing down the bar of the gate the two men sprung outside and beheld a thrilling scene.

There, fallen against the gate, was Buck

Renshaw the Pony Rider. He held his saddle-bags in one hand, his revolver in the other, while his horse lay dead a few paces distant.

That the Pony Rider was badly wounded was certain, yet he had reached the stockade and falling there, when his horse dropped dead from the fire of his foes, he was bravely at bay though unable to rise.

Coming rapidly upon him were a band of outlaws, all of a dozen in number.

"We have the Express bags now, men! Rush in and tear them from him!" shouted a man who led the band, and the mounted outlaws hastily threw themselves from their saddles, just as Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George dashed out.

With a faint yell of triumph Buck Renshaw shouted back:

"You lie! You'll never get the bags, for Buffalo Bill is here!"

At the name the outlaws hesitated, and just then Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George opened fire, and with deadly effect.

"There are but two of them! shoot them down!" yelled the outlaw chief, and the shots rattled forth rapidly, while a voice from the gate called out:

"Fall back into the stockade, for I have dragged Buck in."

It was Lena Ross, who had done as she said. The wounded Pony Rider she had lifted by main strength, and had taken him inside of the stockade gate.

But the outlaws were maddened at the thought of losing the Express bags, which they seemed to know were valuable, and were crowding upon the two defenders who were facing such odds, when again the voice of Little Sunbeam was heard—this time addressing the dogs:

"At them, Tigers! It is your time now! Go!" cried Sunbeam, as she opened the stockade gate and set the half-dozen savage dogs upon the band of Cloven Hoofs who were now close upon Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George.

With yells of terror the Cloven Hoofs sprang for their horses, but one unfortunate fellow was not quick enough and in an instant he was dragged down and would have been torn to pieces had not Gentleman George rushed to his rescue.

As it was, he was already dead, having been wounded and thus fallen easy prey to the dogs.

There were two other dead outlaws lying on the ground and a horse that had been shot, while another stood near, with a broken leg.

This horse Buffalo Bill put out of his misery by a shot just as Lena Ross called out:

"Come to Buck! He is dying, I think."

The dogs were called off from the chase by a loud blast of the horn, but one failed to come back, he having been shot, and as Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George re-entered the stockade they found Buck Renshaw lying upon the cabin porch, his head supported by Lena Ross.

"He is dying," said the girl sadly.

"Yes, but tell the captain I saved the freight."

"They fired on me from ambush, five miles back on the trail, wounding both me and my horse."

"I took to the timber and hid, but when I came out they saw me and chased me here—see, I have three wounds, but I didn't give up the freight."

"My horse fell as we got to the stockade."

"You'll tell the boys, won't you, Bill?"

His voice was very faint, hardly audible, and Buffalo Bill grasping his hand said:

"I will tell them, Pard Buck, and let the captain know all; and I promise you this night's work will not be forgotten—that you will be remembered."

"Thankee, Bill—good-by, friends, for—"

What more he said was unheard, for the words died on his lips as the breath left his body.

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN.

"Why, Buffalo Bill, you are wounded," cried Lena Ross as she laid the head of the dead Pony Rider tenderly down and looked up, after folding his arms across his breast.

"Only a scratch, Miss Lena, and your father needs care now, for I am sure he was wounded."

Lena Ross sprung to the side of her father, who said:

"I am not hurt, my child, though it was a close call."

"See here!"

He showed that a bullet had struck his belt buckle squarely and folded it up, the leaden messenger remaining in the brass.

"It was as severe as a kick and brought me to my knees, but is only a bruise after all."

"Now, Cody, we'll see to that wound of yours, for it may not be such a scratch as you think."

The arm was bared and an ugly gash was visible where a bullet had cut its way, but was by no means serious, and Lena dressed it with the skill of a surgeon.

"I am behind an hour in starting, so must be off, Pard Ross," said Buffalo Bill, and he strapped the bags brought in by Buck Renshaw about his waist, and continued:

"They are marked of extra value I see, and Buck doubtless had orders to save them, at all hazards."

"I will send the boys off duty up to bury poor Buck, Gentleman George, and they shall all know how well you and Miss Little Sunbeam can defend your home against big odds."

"With the aid of Buffalo Bill," said Lena with a smile.

"And the dogs."

"You let your tigers loose just at the right moment, Little Sunbeam, and I don't wonder that the outlaws fled, for I was half of a mind to climb a tree myself, expecting they would take me for a Cloven Hoof."

"Oh, no, they know the difference between wolf and buffalo meat," replied Lena, and both her father and Buffalo Bill laughed heartily at her joke.

In a few minutes the stock-tender had brought up the fresh horse Cody was to ride, and with a farewell grasp of the hand the Pony Rider dashed out of the stockade gate just one hour and ten minutes behind time.

"Come, old fellow, you have got to make the miles fly behind you, for there's lots of money up on my getting back and on time, and as the Unknown, who aided me before, showed me a cut-off of a number of miles, there is a chance that I can make the run. Now show what you can do."

Away through the darkness flew the horse, his hoofs awakening many an echo that broke upon the stillness of the night.

At the first relay station, Buffalo Bill glanced at his watch and saw that he had gained twelve minutes, and as he leaped from his saddle and said:

"Buck Renshaw was pursued to the Valley Farm, to-night, boys, and killed."

"We had a fight with them and beat them off, killing two."

"Look out for them."

Without waiting reply, Buffalo Bill leaped into his saddle and was off like an arrow from a bow.

"Just an hour to make up."

"This horse is a good one and I ought to cut down fifteen minutes to Silent Sam's station."

On went the fleet animal, now through timber land, then across an open space, up hill, down hill, along a valley trail, and mounting, with the same untiring bounds, a long slope, he dashed up to the stockade station over which Silent Sam held sway.

This time Silent Sam was ready for him, holding his horse as he came up.

"Is there any news up the trail?" he asked.

Without heeding the question, Buffalo Bill said sharply:

"That is not the horse I rode here, Sam."

"Want him?"

"You know I do, for I told you so."

"Forgot."

"Well, out with him quick, for you will delay me five minutes or more, and there are bets on this ride."

All the horses were kept in corral at night, and so Silent Sam could have quickly gotten the animal, but delayed until Buffalo Bill called out:

"See here, Silent Sam, if you can't be

ready for the riders when they come, I'll ask Captain Starbuck to get some one here who can!"

In an instant Silent Sam trotted out of the corral with the horse and said:

"I am sorry, Bill—don't report me—meant to do right."

"All right, pard," and with a leap in the saddle Buffalo Bill was gone.

He reached the place where he was to turn off from the trail, and doing so, he found that the horse he rode did not care to slacken his pace in the dense shadow of the timber.

He held right on at the same fleet pace until he drew up at the hill where Buffalo Bill had found him.

"You're as good a guide as the Unknown, good horse, for I would have had to go slow to find my way through that darkness."

So saying, Buffalo Bill hitched the horse to a tree, lowered his saddle and bridle by the lariat still swinging to the tree, and quickly followed himself.

His horse trotted up to him with a neigh of welcome, and quickly saddling and bridling him, he put down the barrier and was again away like a rocket.

The station he had before skipped he this time stopped at, but not to change horses, as he decided to still keep on with Red Devil.

He only gave a warning of the Cloven Hoofs being abroad, and of Buck Renshaw's death.

Then Red Devil leaped forward on the last part of the run, and looking at his watch, for daylight was dawning, Buffalo Bill muttered:

"I have just ten minutes to make up to go in on time."

"I'll do it!"

CHAPTER XI.

ON TIME.

ONCE back in the trail again, which he had left on his western run at the call of his Unknown Guide, Buffalo Bill sent Red Devil flying along at his utmost speed, well knowing what the animal could do.

He had gone but a short distance when, what should he spy ahead in the trail but another stake, with a paper stuck in the top.

He swooped from his saddle and picked it up, throwing the stick away and reading what was written on the paper.

"From my Mysterious and Unknown Guide," he muttered, as he recognized the writing as being the same as that in the warning to the Pony Riders, and the paper he had before found in the trail.

What he now read was short and to the point, as follows:

"As warnings are of no avail, and I feel that you will still ride in defiance of all risks, I will try and protect you, others if I can, but you have the first claim upon me, Buffalo Bill."

"Each time you ride this trail turn off where you did before and a horse will await you."

"If the secret is discovered, I will seek some other way to warn you, but it must not be known that I do so."

"I pledge you to keep the secret that you have."

"A FRIEND IN CAMP."

"Well, I'm pledged to secrecy, and I can but obey, after what the Unknown has done for me."

So saying, Buffalo Bill quickened his pace again to a fleet run, and as he drew near the Headquarters Ranch he could but feel a glow of triumphant satisfaction at what he had accomplished.

"Nearly four hundred miles, dodging an ambush, climbing a rope, risking my neck, saving the treasure, fighting a band of Cloven Hoofs, having no sleep and all within forty-eight hours is not bad work, and I am proud of the accomplishment."

"Well, I've gone through and back again and won my bets, for I am now just on time to this point."

"Quicken your steps a trifle, good Devil, and we'll get in with a few minutes to spare."

His self-congratulation was certainly pardonable under the circumstances; and as, a few minutes after, he came in sight of the station, his face glowed with pride.

But, as he neared the group of Pony Riders who were yelling themselves hoarse, and wildly waving their hats, his face assumed its wonted calm, and he threw himself from his panting horse and handed the bags over to a tall, fine-looking rider who stepped forward to take them, and who said:

"Bill Cody, I've got my money up that you went to Valley Farm and back—did you?"

"The Express answers the question, Wild Bill," was the calm response, and another wild yell greeted the words.

"You are three minutes ahead of time, Buffalo Bill, so have won all bets against your making the run and getting back; but you are wounded."

"A slight gash in the arm from a bullet, Captain Starbuck, received in a brush at Valley Farm with some Cloven Hoofs, and I have to report, I am sorry to say, sir, the death of Buck Renshaw."

"Renshaw dead?" exclaimed the agent, and a silence fell upon the Pony Riders and the stablemen gathered there.

"Yes, sir, and if ever a man died game, he is that man."

"They fired upon him from ambush, some miles beyond Valley Farm, and both his horse and himself were wounded."

"Plucky man that he was, he would not halt, but broke for the timber, eluded them and hid, but when he came out they saw him and gave chase."

"Indians?"

"No, sir, the Cloven Hoofs."

"Go on, Cody, and tell us how poor Buck died," said the agent.

"He ran for Valley Farm, pursued by a dozen outlaws, and though twice wounded he kept his saddle and reached the stockade, his horse falling dead near it."

"Gentleman George, Little Sunbeam and myself went to the rescue and we had it hot for awhile."

"Poor Buck, unable to stand, laid down and fired at them, but little Sunbeam dragged him into the stockade and set loose those dog tigers to come to our aid, and the way they pulled one outlaw down was startling to see."

"The band then fled and left three men dead behind them, one that the dogs can account for."

"Buck died soon after and wished me to tell you and the boys that he died game."

"Good old fellow, I knew he would do that!"

"But you were wounded?"

"Only a scratch, sir, but Buck went under, his horse was killed and one of the dogs."

"And the outlaws?"

"Left three men and two horses dead behind them."

"It was a victory for us then; but, what time did you reach Valley Farm, Bill?"

"On time, sir."

"Then you have won every bet made against you! are you satisfied, boys?"

"Yes, captain, pay over the money," answered several of the riders, and Captain Starbuck turned to Buffalo Bill and remarked:

"I have put Wild Bill on the run from here eastward, Cody, while you are to take the run from here to Valley Farm, and now that Buck Renshaw has gone under I will give Pony Bob the ride on from there."

"Now, Wild Bill, you can go," and the tall handsome scout who had first greeted Buffalo Bill upon his arrival, leaped into his saddle and sped away.

"Now, Pony Bob, you can start for your post, so as to be ready to bring the next Express through to Valley Farm."

"I will start as soon as I have had a talk with Pard Bill, captain," answered the rider addressed as Pony Bob. He was a young man of small, wiry frame, with a face daring and determined in expression.

"Get your breakfast now, Cody, and then go to bed, for you have accomplished a feat never before known on this frontier, in the ride that you have made. It is simply marvelous," said the agent, and three rousing cheers were given for the hero of the Pony Riders, Pony Bob remarking:

"It would be a pity, Bill, for me to talk you to death after what you have passed through, so I'll see you at Valley Farm."

"Good-by all, and remember that Buck

Renshaw makes the sixth Pony Rider to be avenged!"

Pony Bob mounted his horse and set off for his future post of duty, he and Wild Bill having been called from off their runs further east by the agent.

CHAPTER XII.

A JEALOUS CABAL.

THAT the Pony Riders were most earnestly impressed with the achievement of Buffalo Bill there was no doubt.

They knew him as a young man who had led an eventful life.

Danger, hardships, deeds of endurance, hair-breadth escapes and familiarity with death scenes had been familiar to him since he was a boy of ten.

He had been messenger-boy from one wagon train to another when all the freight used by the army and settlers had to be carried in wagons, or "prairie schooners" as they were called.*

He had been pony herder, cowboy, bull-whacker, Indian fighter and guide, and had also won a name as a great buffalo-hunter.

Then he had come with the army up into Utah and drifted into riding Pony Express, as highest prices were paid to men who dared make the rides.

Since going upon the Pony Express it was Buffalo Bill who had carried off all the honors as champion, with his friend Wild Bill as a close second and Pony Bob as number three on the list.

There were yet jealousies among the Pony Riders, strongly as they were united in the ties of brotherhood.

Several had been the champions until Buffalo Bill came; and then they dropped back before his steady advance as the best rider, the one who was always on time in his rides, and the most daring and skillful man of the brotherhood.

Next came Wild Bill, following his pard Buffalo Bill, and then Pony Bob, the firm comrade of the Dare-Devil Bills, as the two former were called, and the trio had never been backed down in any venture.

The few who did not wish to admit that superiority and were jealous of them, were Rocket Rob, Jockey Jack, Phantom Phil, Fearless Frank and Daring Dick.

They had been rivals for honors until Buffalo Bill came, and since then, with Wild Bill and Pony Bob close upon his heels in deeds of daring, they had found among their five that honors were easy, and like a man and wife, when quarreling, being interfered with, they had turned upon the interfering party—that is the quintette of riders had turned against Cody and his two pards.

Not that they did so openly, for they did not wish to admit that they had taken back place, and were most friendly toward them outwardly; but it had been Rocket Rob and his four allies who had bet against Buffalo Bill making the ride to Valley Farm, and then that he would not get there on time, that he would not get there at all, and never get back alive.

All their bets were promptly taken by the warm admirers of Buffalo Bill, when they would not have accepted wagers on any other man, and the successful rider had won them for his backers, as well as his own bet made with Rocket Rob.

As the riders had certainly been "bluffed off," as Agent Starbuck had said, from taking the runs which had been of late so fatal to the men, he had at once sent to their posts for Wild Bill and Pony Bob, and offered them the beats to which they had been sent, Buffalo Bill going to Valley Farm and back, Pony Bob from Valley Farm to Danites' Ranch and back, and Wild Bill from Headquarters Ranch to Death Gulch and back, the three runs covering a distance of two hundred and sixty miles.

It was on these runs that the six Pony Riders had lost their lives or mysteriously disappeared within the past month, and long before that the distance had been known as the Fatal Trail, so many had been the riders

who had come to grief upon it, either by the hands of Indians, road agents or had mysteriously disappeared.

When it came to such a marked fatality as the past month had shown it was no wonder that the Pony Riders, brave as all of them undoubtedly were, for it looked like defying death to make the run.

But when Buffalo Bill had made it, and his two guards had promptly volunteered for the rest of the Fatal Trail, the five allies were put in a very unenviable humor.

Of course it was the place of the agent to have substitutes for the rides, should either of the three pards be killed, and Buffalo Bill had promptly volunteered in case of either of his two comrades being killed, to take their ride, and they had followed his example and done the same.

But still further extras were needed to call on in an emergency, and Captain Starbuck had put down as such Little Lone Star, Happy Harry and Devil Dan, three riders who though they would not volunteer would obey orders if told to go, no matter if they knew they would be killed.

Besides these named, at the Home Ranch, there were two score more of "extras," always kept ready to dispatch to any point, and on half pay until on duty.

The extra men were organized into a company for the protection of the trail, and were wont to ride over it in force each month, and escort the pack-animals bearing supplies to the relay stations.

They were also held for a call to go to any point where there was trouble on the line of Captain Starbuck's district, and their presence kept both outlaws and Indians in check, though at times raids would be made in spite of them.

The captain of these "extras" was Rocket Rob, with Jockey Jack and Phantom Phil for his lieutenants.

When these three, with two others who formed their quintette, went to their quarters, after seeing Buffalo Bill come in safely, and thus losing their bets, they were decidedly in an ugly humor and sat down to discuss the situation where no one could hear them.

CHAPTER XIII.

TROUBLE BREWING.

"WELL pards, I'm out two months' pay on that man," observed Rocket Rob, by way of opening the conversation, when they had reached their cabin, which the five occupied together.

"You was all fools for betting so much, I only put a ten ag'in' him, as I know'd his luck, and feared he might get through," said Daring Dick.

"Well, he got through and downed us."

"I only wish I had his luck," Jockey Jack said.

"Do you think it altogether luck, pard?"

It was Fearless Frank who asked the question.

All looked at him in silence, for there was something very significant in the tone.

All heard him, too, but Phantom Phil asked as though he did not understand:

"Just what did you remark, Fearless Frank?"

"I said did you think it was all just luck that Buffalo Bill always wins and we lose?"

"Don't begin to preach, Frank, about his being ready for wings and a special pet o' providence."

"I don't intend to preach, Rocket Rob, I only asked the question."

"What do you consider it, if it ain't luck, then?"

"Well, I wouldn't say so outside of you, pards, but it do seem to me that luck couldn't cling to a man as constant as it does to him."

All waited for him to continue, and as he remained silent, Rocket Rob said:

"We are waiting, Frank."

"Now, Buffalo Bill has been around a heap, and who knows but that he may—"

Again he paused and glanced furtively at the faces of his comrades.

"What were you saying, Frank?"

"Mind you, Rocket Rob, I doesn't say it is so, only maybe he might play into the hands of the outlaws or Indians."

"How could he?"

"He speaks several Injun languages, don't he?"

"Yes."

"He's known to the Utes, Piutes, Pawnees, Blackfeet and other tribes."

"Weil?"

"Now he might—mind you I say might—have an understanding with the chiefs that he was to go through with his scalp and Express boodle, while other riders were to lose theirs."

"But I think outlaws, not Indians, are the ones most to fear on this trail, and maybe Mormons."

"Maybe so, Rocket Rob, but could not the same understanding be had with them or with the Injuns?"

"Yes, it could."

"But is it?" asked Phantom Phil.

"That is just what we want to know."

"Have you any suspicion founded on fact, Fearless Frank?" asked one.

"I may be wrong, but I has put certain things together and to me it does look suspicious."

"As what, for instance?"

"His wonderful luck."

"We all grant that."

"In the face of that warning he went through."

"Yes."

"Buck Renshaw was killed."

"True."

"Jess Jordan was killed."

"Yes."

"And Ed Darke and Kit Valiant were killed."

"We all know that."

"And Diamond Ned and Jim Jordan has disappeared?"

"Yes."

"But Buffalo Bill takes all big chances with death, and comes out ahead of the game every time."

"Why, the boys are beginniz to bet on his being killed, or going through safe, every time he leaves headquarters."

"Yes, and his two best pards, Wild Bill and Pony Bob, go through, too."

"Yes, they do, and they may be in the game with him."

"You mean in league with the Indians, outlaws, or whoever it is that holds up the riders?"

"Yes."

"Well, give us all reasons for suspicion, pard, so we can get down to bed-rock," said Rocket Rob.

"He didn't care for that warning."

"No, and it backed down all the rest of us."

"It looked to me as though he knew he'd be safe."

"And he was."

"Yes, and do you notice that he and his two pards dresses different from the rest of us."

"They all wear buckskins, top-boots, and a light slouch hat."

"Yes, and not a man of us togs up that way."

"You consider it a mark by which they might be recognized?"

"It might be."

"So it might."

"I had not thought of that," Rocket Rob said, in a meditative way.

"And the three of them were never seen to ride anything but a bay horse."

"Right you are there, too, pard."

"Buffalo Bill has his Red Devil, Red Bird, Redskin, Red Runner, Red Wing and Red Fire, all blood bays, while Wild Bill has his horses named Scarlet, Crimson, Carmine and Blood and all bright bays."

"Pony Bob has got Sunrise, Sunset, Sunbeam and Sundown. They are all blood bays, you know, and any one seeing a Pony Rider coming, dressed in buckskin, and a light slouch hat, and riding a bay horse, might let him go by, when one not so dressed and mounted might be killed."

"Pards, we must look into the matter," declared Rocket Rob, earnestly, and there followed a hearty:

"Yes!"

CHAPTER XIV.

UNDER SUSPICION.

THAT the five Pony Riders, who were the immediate pards of Rocket Rob, were deeply

* Buffalo Bill began his eventful career as a boy of ten, carrying messages from the wagon trains of Russell, Majors and Waddell, strung out over hundreds of miles on the march. His services then gained him a man's wages, though a little boy.

impressed with the suspicious circumstances brought up against Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Pony Bob, there was no doubt.

Upon the principle of misery loving company, they were united, for all of them had lost money betting against Buffalo Bill's success.

Then, too, they had all been dethroned by his remarkable deed, which so much overshadowed theirs.

They were decidedly in an ugly humor toward Buffalo Bill, and it only needed the spark of suspicion, set forth by Fearless Frank, to kindle a fire of proof in their minds that no mere luck could carry a man through with what Will Cody had accomplished.

There must be something else, and Fearless Frank had doubtless hit the nail on the head in suspecting that the Indians and Cloven Hoofs spared the three pards, for reasons to be discovered, to vent all their hatred upon others of the riders.

That the three Pony Riders dressed alike, and all rode blood-bay horses, was not put down as an eccentricity on their part, but as a proof that they did so for some subtle purpose.

What that purpose was the quintette determined to find out.

Now, how to go about making the discovery that their three fellow-riders were other than they seemed, was a question they must very carefully consider.

They knew that not one of the three were men to trifle with, and they were aware how serious was the charge that they must make, when they asserted the three men were secretly in league with either the Indians, Mormons or outlaws, for they believed that many Mormons were lawless in their deeds towards Gentiles, and opposing civilization not established in the wilds by followers of their creed.

Whether this was true or not of a few lawless followers of Brigham Young, the Mormons as a whole were made to suffer for many crimes of outlaws and deeds done by the Indians, and the Pony Riders stood in awe of them as of foes they had real cause to dread.

The warning letter was discovered by the five men and the writer of that too was connected with Buffalo Bill, and, after a long conversation together they worked themselves into the belief that they really had three traitors in their midst.

But there was not one of the five, plucky men though they were, who had the nerve to openly make the charge against Buffalo Bill and his two friends, that they were not true to the League of Pony Riders.

They must first get undoubted proof against them and then spring the trap that would destroy them.

To do this they must establish a spy system among themselves, and Rocket Rob told just how this could be done.

"Pards, we have got to watch them," he said in a low tone.

There was no dissenting voice to this, and he went on:

"So do this: keep one of our number constantly on the watch.

"Now this must be a dead secret among us five, for we can trust each other. A hint of it to others would thwart our whole scheme and put us in a hole."

"Yes, a real hole in the ground," supplemented Fearless Frank in a tone the significance of which all understood.

"Now one of us five has got to play spy, and we are to relieve each other at the business."

"What's your plan, Rob?" asked Jockey Jack.

"It's for one of us to go out ahead of Buffalo Bill on his next ride.

"We are to go some hours before, and go to the place where the Cloven Hoofs would hold him up if anywhere.

"I say to the place, but I mean near it.

"The man that goes can turn off the trail, hide his horse and on foot creep near to the trail, getting position where he can see a long way in both directions, but not, to be seen.

"He will have to take grub along and stay in position until Buffalo Bill comes back, if he don't discover anything when he's going.

"If the place he selects don't appear to be

the right one, then the next man who goes as a spy must select another one, and so on.

"We can report the man that goes as on the sick list, and so he won't be missed.

"Now, I want to know who will be the first to go?"

Rocket Rob glanced over the faces of his comrades and saw that none of them seemed just anxious to lead off, though they all thought the plan was the best one to entrap Buffalo Bill.

As no one spoke, Rocket Rob continued.

"Maybe I had better lead off."

"No, we want you here as captain. I'll go as Number One," spoke up Fearless Frank.

"Yes, you made the charge against Buffalo Bill, so you are the first to go as spy, Fearless Frank," said Rocket Rob.

And so Fearless Frank was the one to go as spy.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET CONFESSED.

BUFFALO BILL was thoroughly rested when he woke up at nightfall, after his champion ride.

His frame was too enduring to get sore from hard work, and he felt no ill-effects when he got up and said that he was ready for supper.

This over, and he ate heartily, he went over to headquarters cabin to have a talk with Starbuck.

The captain was a man all the Pony Riders liked, yet knew better than to trifle with.

He was firm with all, rigid in his discipline, but kept the best horses constantly on hand for them to select from, had the trappings always in the best condition, and always supplied his men with the best food, having some one hunting game for them all the time.

The stablemen were kept up to the mark in looking after their duties, and there was military discipline upon all.

Captain Starbuck had been a cavalry soldier for ten years, rising to the rank of orderly-sergeant.

Then he had driven stage for several years, and from that had gone to keeping a border tavern and being sheriff of the place as well.

Those who knew him were well aware that he had a "record" as a man who had never been run over, but never sought trouble, and he was selected as the very one to take charge of the Utah Division of the Pony Express Line.

He at once brought order out of chaos, and in a short while, though on the most dangerous and worst part of the whole trail, his riders made a record as the promptest men on time, the most daring, trustworthy, as well as having proven themselves good Indian-fighters.

By courtesy Nat Starbuck had been promoted to "captain," as the commander of the Pony Rider's Division.

He was thoroughly trusted by the company, and he was known to be fully competent.

Buffalo Bill and Starbuck had met before, when the one was an army sergeant and the other a messenger for the Overland wagon-trains, and they had been fast friends.

When Buffalo Bill came to the Pony Express, Captain Nat, as he was most frequently called, had been very glad to have him, and when Wild Bill and Pony Bob had joined later, through their pard leading the way, Starbuck had written to the superintendent of the company:

"I have now got three men who will ride if the stars fall.

"They are Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Pony Bob, and I'll stake my life against them, any time.

"The other men are good. I have the pick of the frontier, and there is not one who will not do to tie to, so send on your freight, and if it can go through my men will take it, but if it fails, you will know that the man who carried it is dead."

This was high praise for his company of riders, but Nat Starbuck knew them, and in spite of set-backs they had not failed him, for some one had gone through on each ride, and those who had lost their freight had lost their lives, or had most mysteriously disappeared.

When Buffalo Bill reached headquarters he found Captain Starbuck smoking his pipe.

"Ah, Bill, glad to see you.

"I just finished my report, and wished to question you, but did not care to wake you, so made it up without.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine as silk, thank you, sir, for I had a good, long sleep, then ate a few pounds of supper, and thought I'd come over and see you before I turned in for the night to make up on sleep."

"I am glad you did, and I won't detain you long, for to-morrow comes the rub again, you know."

"I am ready, sir."

"I know that, Bill, you always are ready.

"You may be sure I wrote a deservedly flattering report of what you had done."

"You are very kind, sir, but we are in this business to put the freight through, so why shrink when certain death seems to bar the way.

"Suppose a soldier did not go into battle if he feared he would be killed, what kind of an army would we have?"

"No, I am here to take all chances, and if I cannot circumvent my foes, then I am ready to meet the alternative."

"Well said, Cody, and I know that I can rely upon you and others in spite of what has happened."

"I do not blame the men from holding back against the warnings, but I cannot do as they wish, and run half a dozen of them through together.

"Suppose every division had to send a Pony Rider through under a guard, it would take thousands of men and then the distance could not be made in one-third of the time."

"You are right, sir. It is a one man ride, and the Mormons who oppose it, the outlaws and the Indians must learn that the Pony Rider is going through on a lone trail.

"If one rider goes under, another must take his place, and the ride must and shall be made."

"Right you are, Cody!"

"But now, let me ask you if you have any idea as to the sender of that mysterious letter of warning?"

"Captain Starbuck, I came over here to tell you what I deemed it my duty to make known to you."

"Well, Cody?"

"I am under a pledge of secrecy, but I feel that I owe it to you to let you know the secret."

"I will so consider what you tell me, Bill."

"I do not wish to appear under false colors, sir, and hence I desire to make known to you how I got through on my last run.

"I had intended to make a dash, where I believed the ambush was, firing with both revolvers, but I was saved making the effort to break through, and I will tell you how."

Then Buffalo Bill told of his warning, his unknown guide, and how he had returned, making known also the finding of a second warning paper in the trail.

"This is remarkable, Bill; but may your mysterious guide always protect you," earnestly said Captain Starbuck; and soon after Buffalo Bill returned to his cabin and turned in for the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

WILD BILL'S "SOUVENIR."

THERE was a large crowd at the post the next morning to see the arrival of one Pony Rider and departure of another.

All of the riders were there, with few exceptions, and the stablemen had also put in an appearance in numbers.

The settlers had heard of the fate of the riders of late, who had ridden what was known as the Death Run, and they also had come in, while miners, and others in the Home Ranch settlement were all on hand.

The Pony Riders had been called up by Captain Starbuck and sworn to secrecy on the subject of the warning letter, as it was feared that, if it got out, it might cause trouble for the one who had warned them.

As the time drew near for the coming in of the rider from the eastward, the crowd began to gather at the post.

The post was a tall staff, upon which waved the flag of the Pony Riders, a red field with a horse and rider in blue.

Over the headquarters cabin floated the Stars and Stripes, and the post was right in front of it.

There were but a few minutes to spare to the time of arrival when Buffalo Bill came walking leisurely toward the crowd.

He was all ready for the ride, dressed as was his wont, but carrying, all noticed, two revolvers in his belt, while at his back was slung a lariat.

He was wholly unmoved and greeted the crowd with a pleasant word, glancing at his watch as he did so.

Just then Juniper, the man who had cared for Buffalo Bill's horses, came up leading Red Devil.

The crowd gave the vicious animal ample room, for he appeared in an ugly humor, and Juniper was having trouble with him until Buffalo Bill stepped forward and spoke to the beast, sharply.

Instantly the horse calmed down, and Juniper had no further trouble with him.

The captain always knew ahead of the days when extra valuable packages were to go over the trail, so he now came out of his cabin and said:

"All ready, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you will have another valuable freight to-day, as Wild Bill brings one in."

"If Wild Bill gets in," growled Rocket Rob.

"Oh, he'll get in all the same, Rocket Rob, never fear," assured Buffalo Bill, confidently.

"He's no more than human, and a bullet will down him as quickly as it will any of the rest of us, or even you," was the half sullen reply.

"Doubtless, if he gets in the way of one; but I have faith that Hickok will as surely get in, as I will reach the end of my run, or that Pony Bob will make his from Valley Farm to Danites' Ranch. We are the lucky three you know."

"Do you want to bet that all three of you go through?"

"Yes, of course, and bet to win."

"Will you bet that the rider whom Wild Bill gets his freight from will come through?"

"No; that chap, whoever he is, is not on my betting list."

"Will you bet that the man Pony Bob gives his freight to goes through?"

"No, again."

"But you will bet on yourself, Wild Bill and Pony Bob?"

"Of course I will. The Good Luck Three every time! So name your bet."

"First, why won't you bet on the others?" demanded Bob, as if to get information for the jealous five.

"For the simple and sufficient reason that I do not know them."

"Don't know them?"

"No, I am not sure who brings the freight to Wild Bill or takes it from Pony Bob. If I was I might bet on them, one way or the other."

"How do you mean?"

"That they would, or would not get through."

"Then you only have faith in you and your particular pards."

"I wish to consider all the riders my pards, but as you put it that way, I will say that I have faith in a man as I know him, and when he has shown just what is in him."

"I would bet on the going through of many I see here, while there are some I would not bet on."

"Who, for instance?"

Buffalo Bill smiled and replied:

"Did you go through on the east run that I volunteered for, Rocket Rob?"

A loud laugh greeted this question, and Rocket Rob retorted with a visible show of anger:

"Well, I'll bet you fifty dollars, Buffalo Bill, that your Good Luck Three, as you call yourselves, don't go through safe on this run."

"I'll take the bet!"

"Book it, please, Captain Starbuck, and—there comes Wild Bill now," and a yell greeted Buffalo Bill's words, while Captain Starbuck called out:

"A half a minute in his favor!"

Along the trail Wild Bill came with a rush, his horse all in a foam.

As he drew nearer, it was seen that the horse was bleeding from a wound in his neck, and drawing up, Wild Bill waved a long black scalp lock around his head and called out:

"It was an Indian, this time, captain; but I brought you a souvenir of him!"

"Then you were fired on by Indians, Wild Bill?"

"No, sir; only one lone Indian, for I saw no other. The bullet struck my horse, but I rode onto him before he could fire again, and that was his funeral. I thought I'd fetch his scalp along, for actions speak louder than words."

"Good luck to you, Pard Bill! May you go through without a scratch! You carry valuable freight," he continued, turning to Buffalo Bill, who had heard what his friend had said, without any word of comment, and leaping into his saddle, went away with one mighty bound of the angry and impatient horse, which was to risk his life with his rider's, and, followed by a roaring cheer from the crowd, he was watched by all until he had disappeared at the first turn in the Overland Trail.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPY.

THERE were very few men in the crowd that saw Buffalo Bill ride away, who thought they would ever behold him alive again.

Good luck could not continually favor him, was their way of putting it.

So believing, several openly asserted that he would never get through.

"How much is your opinion worth, pards? I've got money to bet that he goes through," called out Wild Bill, turning from Captain Starbuck, with whom he had been talking.

Silence fell at once upon the crowd, and Wild Bill called out:

"Money talks, pards!"

"Well, it's my opinion he goes under," said Jockey Jack.

"Put up or shut up!" cried Wild Bill, waving a roll of bills above his head.

"You can't back me down, Wild Bill, so name your sum," Jockey Jack added, with some temper.

"Good! You are the kind of man I like—one who has the courage of his opinions."

"There is fifty dollars, and I've got more of the same sort if anybody wants to put up."

Jockey Jack covered the bet promptly, and one other Pony Rider took a thirty dollar wager that Buffalo Bill would not go through.

Wild Bill at once covered it, and then walked off to his cabin.

Meantime, Buffalo Bill was riding along with Red Devil at a full run—on—on, until the first relay was reached and passed, for, as before, he did not change his horse. The stock tenders there were too much afraid of Red Devil, while, at the next station, there was a pen in which he could be kept to himself, if need be.

As Bill neared the spot where he had before found the stick with the warning in it, his eyes were searching the trail to see if there was any signal there this time.

He discovered none, and was about to turn off to go to the secret corral over under the cliffs, when just off from the trail he thought he saw a head disappear behind a rock which was sheltered by a group of small pines.

Drawing rein he sat upon his horse waiting, a revolver cocked, in his hand.

Still as a statue in bronze were horse and rider, the eyes of the latter fixed searchingly upon the rock.

Buffalo Bill was sure that whoever was there would look over the stone again to see why he did not ride on.

Just as he had surmised, soon the top of a hat appeared over the rock; then the forehead and eyes of a man; when quick as a flash, the Pony Rider fired.

He saw the head disappear, then reappear, and a rifle ran out over the rock and flashed just as Buffalo Bill pulled trigger a second time.

The head disappeared once more, the rifle barrel flew up and all was silence.

"Well, he aimed straight," remarked the Good Luck Rider, as he wiped the blood from a scratch on the cheek, for the bullet had merely grazed it.

"There may be others there," muttered the rider; at which thought he dismounted, left Red Devil standing and ran swiftly and noiselessly to the rock.

Darting around it he suddenly stopped and from his lips broke the words:

"My God!"

"Bill, I'm done for," was the faint reply.

"Fearless Frank, my poor pard, what in Heaven's name did you lie in ambush to kill me for?"

"You've got it wrong, Pard Bill, for I didn't intend to kill you, but you saw me, thought I was an outlaw, and fired, and then, to protect myself, I had to fire."

"What a terrible mistake I made in firing, yet what else was I to infer but that you were an outlaw, and here to kill me? Oh, Frank, what a terrible mistake you made."

"Bill, I've got my death call, and I'll tell the truth."

He paused a moment to regain his breath.

"I was here for a purpose, and that was to ascertain for a fact if what we opined was true. We five—you know whom I mean—suspected you of being in with whoever kills the riders, and I was the spy to find out."

"Great God! Fearless Frank, did you suspect me—of a crime?"

"We did; and I was spying, and—say, Bill, catch me for I'm falling."

He stretched out his hands and Buffalo Bill grasped them, though the man was not falling, for he already lay flat on the ground.

Before Buffalo Bill could speak, he felt the tight grasp of the hands released and the Pony Rider spy was dead!

That Buffalo Bill was deeply impressed there was no question, for he stood like one struck a stunning blow.

But, in an instant, he seemed himself, and, with a deep sigh said:

"Poor fellow, he made a sad mistake."

Then he looked about him for the horse of the Pony Rider spy, and after a few minutes found him hitched in a thicket.

Leading him to the rock he strapped the body to the saddle, and, mounting Red Devil, started off for the corral under the cliff, but going at a slow pace, not caring to dash along with the dead body of the unfortunate Pony Rider, who had come to such an untimely end.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HALF-WAY.

REACHING the secret corral under the cliff, Buffalo Bill stood up in his saddle and lifted the body of Fearless Frank to a shelf rock where it would be safe from the coyotes until his return, and where, unseen by the vultures, it would be undisturbed by them.

Then he put up the the barrier and turned the two horses loose in the natural corral to await his return.

Fastening his saddle, bridle and the leather bags and buckskin pouch to the end of the double lariat, he climbed on top and drew the things up after him.

There stood the horse, the same he had left there, but he could see that he had been taken away and cared for by the Mysterious Guide and then brought back in time for his coming.

Nowhere visible, however, was the unknown friend in need.

Saddling and bridling the animal, Buffalo Bill mounted and rode rapidly away upon his run.

He had lost over half an hour by his unfortunate and fatal meeting with Fearless Frank, but he knew the cut-off would save the time, and did not push on at fullest speed.

Turning again into the Pony Trail, when it at length was reached, he looked at his watch and saw that he had some minutes to spare, but for some reason he now dashed on at the utmost speed of his fresh mount.

When at last he dashed up to the lone cabin of Silent Sam, he found the stock-tender not ready for him.

The man looked greatly confused at being again caught not ready, and said:

"You is away ahead o' time, Buffalo Bill."

"Just twelve minutes, and had you started a quarter of an hour ago to get ready, Silent Sam, you could not have had my horse on time."

Silent Sam made no reply, and hastily saw after a horse.

He came back with one Buffalo Bill always rode from there—a blood-bay, that looked like a flyer.

"If you delay me again, Silent Sam, I shall have to report you," said the rider as he leaped into his saddle, and, awaiting for no reply, he dashed away.

He got a bite to eat at the next relay, and a fresh mount; and, half an hour ahead of time, he rode up to Valley Farm Station.

"Well, Bill, you are a wonder, and certainly bear a charmed life, for I have seen no less than half a dozen Cloven Hoofs go by on the trail since you were here," informed Gentleman George.

"I was lucky enough not to meet them."

"But, I left you in hard luck, last time I was here, and plenty to do. How goes it?"

"All serene, for we have had no visitors."

"I buried the Cloven Hoofs on one side of the trail, a hundred yards from here, but Lena and myself gave poor Renshaw a resting-place in the valley, a pretty spot on the bank of the brook. I read the service for dead over him, as in fact I did over the others, for they were human beings, Cody, and death cancels such debts as hatred, and wipes out the stain of crime."

"I agree with you, Gentleman George, perfectly; but I have brought with me a valuable freight, and am sorry to see that Pony Bob is not in."

"Oh, have no fear of him, for he'll come in all right. You forget you are half an hour ahead of time."

"True, I think there is no need for anxiety about Bob, though I did not know, but that he might have run upon some of those Cloven Hoofs you saw go by."

"But, my greatest anxiety now is for Miss Lena and yourself, Mr. Ross, since we had the fight here—fear that the cut-throats might come back for revenge."

"We will take care of them if they do come—Lena and I, see if we do not!"

"But my daughter waited up to see you and Pony Bob to-night, and will have ready the best supper she can get up for you."

"Go in, and I'll follow—see, the Tigers, as you call my dogs, know you as their friend now."

"Oh! I'm willing to be friendly, you bet, for no man wants to offend one of those four-footed sentinels."

"What are their names, or do you just bunch them all as dogs?"

"No, Lena named them—Tiger, Lion, Wolf, Panther and Grizzly, while Cat was killed the other night—no matter which one you call, they'll all come."

"They look it, and come when you don't call them, too, I'll bet!" said Buffalo Bill as he entered the cabin.

CHAPTER XIX.

PONY BOB'S RUSE.

It was the duty of Gentleman George, as stock-tender, to see to the horse Buffalo Bill had ridden to the station, and also to get fresh animals for him and Pony Bob to ride away again.

Here the two bags of Express and mail were exchanged by the riders, for Buffalo Bill was to take what Pony Bob would bring and turn over to him what he had come through with, from the eastward.

At this station the riders were allowed an hour's halt for supper, and rest before starting back again on the long run, so Lena Ross always prepared a good meal for them, leaving it for her father to serve it, for the hour of arrival was eleven at night and departure twelve.

The riders needed this rest, and supper too, for it was a long trail they had before them and hours before they got their breakfast, while each way from Valley Farm the trail was dark, rugged, lonely and dangerous.

Not long after Buffalo Bill entered the cabin Gentleman George heard the clatter of hoofs and a moment after, up dashed Pony Bob.

He had gone to his post from the Home Ranch as ordered, and was there in time to receive the next Express sent through from the west.

"Just on time, Pony Bob," welcomed Gentleman George.

"It's blind luck that I am here, pard; but has Buffalo Bill arrived?" asked Bob as he threw himself from the saddle.

"Yes, half an hour ago."

"Then he was playing in as big luck as I was."

"What was the matter, Bob?"

"I'm hungry. Come in and I'll tell you while I eat, though they say it is not polite to talk with your mouth full."

"Go in and I'll soon follow," ordered the stock-tender.

Bob entered the cabin and found Lena Ross busy preparing supper, while Buffalo Bill sat near watching her.

The two pards shook hands warmly, like men who had just met after a long absence from each other, for they realized that they had both been through a dread ordeal, and glad were they to meet again.

"And how are you, Miss Lena?" asked Pony Bob, turning to the young girl.

"Always well, Pony Bob; but, as you know it is like caring for a dying person to look after you Pony Riders now, as there is no telling if you will ever come in, since the outlaws have been killing you by the wholesale," said Lena Ross feelingly.

"Bless your sweet soul, Little Sunbeam, it's worth risking life to get here and eat one of your suppers—ah! here is your father, and I'll tell you all now how near I came to missing supper, here, to-night."

"You had trouble then, Bob?" said Buffalo Bill with more anxiety for his friend than he ever felt for himself.

"You bet I had trouble, or I thought I did, and I'll tell you how it was:

"I stopped at the brook the other side of Signal Rock to give my horse a swallow of water, as we always do, when, out of the darkness, in a way that scared me half out of my wits, a voice said:

"'Ride around Indian Range, for there is an ambush in the timber, this side of the pass, Pony Bob.'"

"That was remarkable. And the voice called you by name?" said Gentleman George.

"It did; and I called out and asked who it was, but got no answer."

"And then?" asked Buffalo Bill, deeply interested.

"I rode into the timber, but could find no one, and I tell you I was mystified."

"Have you no idea who it was?" asked Lena Ross.

"Not the slightest, unless it was one of my Mormon friends, for you know the Mormons are quite friendly to me, as I saved a train once from an attack by Indians. But, Bill, what solution can you offer of this strange warning?"

"Well, Pony, some one who was friendly to you gave you the warning; but you cannot have heeded it to have gotten here on time, as around the range it would have been twenty miles out of your way."

"All of that, Pard Bill."

"What did you do?"

"I played a lone hand, and won."

"I rode on to the thicket quietly; then I started at a run, yelling out:

"'Run, pards, all of you, for he's coming and a big gang with him!'"

"It was a bold game to play, Bob, but I suppose it won."

"It did win, Pard Bill, for there were shouts of alarm, and quite a number of horsemen, I should say over half a dozen, mounted in great haste and went tearing away through the timber all together."

"And you?"

"I simply flew along the trail, and here I am, friends; but, Miss Lena has supper ready, I see, and I can do it more than justice," and Pony Bob dismissed his adventure with the cool manner of one to whom deadly danger was an every-day occurrence.

But the others talked over the strategy of Pony Bob and his escape, while Buffalo Bill

said to him, as they went out to mount their horses and go their separate ways:

"Bob, always heed the warning of the one who warned you to-night."

CHAPTER XX.

A VOLUNTEER WITNESS.

BUFFALO BILL's injunction to Pony Bob caused the latter to look sharply at him and ask:

"Do you know who it was?"

"I know enough to tell you to heed every warning thus given you, Bob; but I cannot say more, now."

"Good-night, and look out on your return for the Cloven Hoofs, for they'll be doubly anxious to down you after the fright you gave them."

"You bet they will! but, I'm watching for them all the time," and with a grasp of the hand Pony Bob leaped into his saddle and was off in one direction, while Buffalo Bill went in the other, the clattering of hoofs soon dying away in the distance; and Gentleman George, after closing the stockade gate, going into the cabin to join his daughter, leaving the dogs on duty as untiring and sleepless sentinels to give him warning of danger.

Buffalo Bill rode back with a sad heart, for he remembered the dead body of a former comrade that he had to carry back with him to the Home Ranch.

He found Silent Sam awaiting him, this time, and with the horse loaned him by his Unknown Guide.

This time he had very little to say, and it was Silent Sam who seemed anxious to talk.

But, Buffalo Bill was in no humor for conversation, and warning the stock-tender to be on time when he next came through, he was riding away when he caught the low muttered words:

"If you get through, next time?"

"What did you say, Silent Sam?"

"Nothin'?"

"I heard what you said, and I want to know right now what reason you have for saying what you did?"

"The riders is bein' kilt every day, and you is more likely to go than any of them."

"Why?"

"You takes bigger chances."

"Well, I'm still on deck, and I'm going to try and stay as long as I can. Just see if I don't come through next time."

With this Buffalo Bill rode away, and when he came to the spot where he turned off for the secret corral, the horse turned as before and kept up the same steady pace.

Arriving at the top of the cliff he lowered his saddle and bridle, hitched the horse and and then slid down the lariat into the little basin.

The two horses were there, and so also was the silent form lying upon the rock shelf.

When he had saddled the two animals he lifted down the body of Fearless Frank and firmly secured it to the saddle with his lariat.

Then he mounted Red Devil, and with the other horse and his ghastly burden in lead, he rode out of the basin, crossed the stream and went along once more at a rapid pace.

As he reached the true Pony Trail he looked at his watch and saw that he was yet twenty minutes ahead of his time.

"I am glad of this, for I cannot ride as fast with this horse in lead, and so will just about get in on time."

"And then what a surprise for all when they see Fearless Frank dead, and learn how he died!"

"What can I say about it and tell the truth, for I hate to lie."

"I of course cannot tell what he told me with his last words, that there is a plot between Rocket Rob and his comrades to entrap me by spying upon my trail and proving that I am in league with the Cloven Hoofs."

"No, I must keep that secret and watch those fellows."

"I will not say that Fearless Frank was not killed at once, for it won't do to let them know that he made any confession."

"I will just state that I saw a head dodge down behind the rock, was ready for a shot, fired at the second glance I caught of one I believed an outlaw and that the rifle was fired at me, the bullet grazing my cheek, and

the scratch remains as proof—ah! another warning," and Buffalo Bill's eyes fell upon a stick stuck in the trail, and a slip of paper upon it.

He took the paper as he rode up and reading it saw that it was the same handwriting as before.

Halting his horses for a moment he read:

"I saw your duel with one you believed to be an outlaw, but who proved to be a comrade, a supposed friend.

"If you get into trouble through it, and need a witness, send one who is your friend with a letter asking me to come. Let him deposit it on the rock where you killed Fearless Frank, weighting it down with a stone to prevent it from blowing away.

"Only to save you will I appear, so do not trick me into coming unless your story of the affair is not believed.

"YOUR UNKNOWN GUIDE."

Twice Buffalo Bill read this letter over; then, putting it securely away in his pocket he resumed his way, wondering at this offer of his Unknown Guide to still further be his friend in need.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SUSPECT FOUR.

WHEN the time drew near for the coming in of Buffalo Bill the crowd began to gather at the starting-post.

That a great deal of anxiety was felt there was no doubt, but if Captain Starbuck felt anxious he had learned to conceal his feelings and was smoking his pipe most leisurely as he sat upon the piazza of his cabin, which was combined tavern, office of the company, store-room and general headquarters.

There was one thing that had given more cause for anxiety than simply the dread of what might happen to Buffalo Bill, and that was the unaccountable disappearance of Fearless Frank.

At roll-call the morning before he had been reported sick by Rocket Rob, and just after the going of Buffalo Bill Captain Starbuck had gone over to his cabin to see how he was.

"I guess he's asleep, cap'n," said Rocket Rob, who was outside talking to Jockey Jack.

"Well, I'll see him anyhow, for if he is ill he must be looked after at once."

With this Captain Starbuck had entered the cabin, but Fearless Frank was not to be found.

Rocket Rob called him, but no answer came, and then they decided that he had slipped out of the cabin when all were up at the post to see Wild Bill come in and Buffalo Bill start.

"I guess he's slipped away on a hunt, and played sick so that he would not have to report his absence, cap'n."

"He did wrong, for my orders are strict that no rider shall leave camp now without my permission, as there is no telling at what moment I may have to call the whole force out, after all that has happened of late.

"Send Fearless Frank to report to me the moment he returns."

With this Captain Starbuck returned to his quarters.

But the day passed and Fearless Frank did not appear.

When night came on Captain Starbuck grew angry at Fearless Frank's long stay, as he had pretended to be sick to get away, and then believing his absence sufficiently accounted for, remained out all day for a hunt, and it was known how extravagantly fond he was of the sport of both hunting and fishing.

As he did not appear at dark, his immediate comrades did not know what to make of it and grew anxious.

They had already reported him as on the sick list, and that he had slipped off while they were away, so they could say nothing to the contrary without compromising themselves.

He had taken his best horse, rifle and some food, Captain Starbuck ascertained later; but expecting he would return by night, no effort was made to look for him.

As darkness had fallen several hours, and he did not return, the greatest anxiety was

felt for him, and Captain Starbuck said, if he did not put in an appearance a search-party would be sent out for him.

His immediate comrades were far more anxious than they cared to admit.

They feared that he had met Buffalo Bill, who, angered at being dogged by him, had shot him.

Or perhaps in a duel between them both had been killed.

There was nothing to do then but wait.

As Rocket Rob and his three companions were the ones ordered to look up Fearless Frank the next morning, when he did not appear, they were very slow in getting off, as they wished to first see whether Buffalo Bill came in or not.

With one excuse and another they delayed in starting until it was time for Buffalo Bill to come in and then they rode up to the starting-post and reported that, as their companion had not yet put in an appearance, they were ready to go in search of him.

"Why, I thought you had gone an hour ago, Rocket Rob," said the captain hotly.

"Go at once!"

"Would it not be well to await the arrival of Buffalo Bill first, sir?"

"What for?"

"I've may have seen him."

"Oh, I forgot that you had a bet on with Cody, and you are too anxious to know the result to wait until your return from looking up your friend," said Captain Starbuck with a sneer.

Rocket Rob winced under this shot, and said:

"I am ready to go at once, sir."

"Then, why the devil don't you do it?" swore Captain Starbuck, now thoroughly angry.

Rocket Rob turned to his comrades with an injured look upon his face and said:

"Come on, boys!"

Off they started and the way they were taking was the regular Pony Trail.

"Why don't you go to the corral and pick up Fearless Frank's trail there and follow it, or, are you first going to meet Buffalo Bill and find out if you have lost or won your bet?"

The crowd were amazed at the stubbornness of Rocket Rob and knew that he would get into trouble with Captain Starbuck if he provoked him further; but, just then, the cry rose that Buffalo Bill was coming, and the four comrades were forgotten in the approach of the Pony Rider, and who was on time.

CHAPTER XXII.

BUFFALO BILL'S ACCUSER!

WILD BILL had reported at the post, ready for his ride, and Juniper stood near by, holding his horse, a large, long-haired blood-bay that had both speed and endurance in unlimited quantities.

"What do you think of Fearless Frank's absence, Wild Bill?" asked Captain Starbuck after he had given the daring rider his orders for his eastward run.

"I think he has struck bigger game than he could handle, captain."

"You mean that he has met a grizzly and been worsted?"

"Yes, sir, something that got the best of him—an Indian, perhaps, or a Cloven Hoof; or, maybe his horse has fallen on him and hurt him, or he has shot himself by accident.

"In fact it is hard to tell."

"Well, I have sent his pards out to search for him and we will soon know."

"But you have no dread of Cody's coming in?"

"Not the slightest, sir, for that man was not born to be downed, captain."

"If ever man had a charmed life he has, and I am superstitious enough to bet big money on his going through every time, for there is some little angel aloft that seems to have nothing else to do than to watch over Bill Cody, and the little winged one has no picnic of it, either."

Captain Starbuck laughed at Wild Bill's suggestion regarding Buffalo Bill's guardian angel, and then glancing toward the riders' cabin he muttered an imprecation and said:

"Those fellows have not yet gone to work to look up Fearless Frank, for there they come, now."

Then followed the conversation already

told, between Rocket Rob and Captain Starbuck, and which was ended by the cry:

"Buffalo Bill is coming!"

"And he's on time," averred one.

"To the minute," Captain Starbuck remarked.

"Rocket Rob, you've lost your bet, and you, too, Jockey Jack," called out a voice in the crowd.

"Bill has a horse in lead, sir," said Wild Bill.

"So he has, and a pack-animal at that."

"No, captain; it is a dead body strapped on the saddle," Wild Bill rejoined.

"He has a dead body along," shouted a man.

"He's downed an outlaw," cried another, and three cheers were given, but they ended abruptly as Wild Bill cried:

"Captain Starbuck, that is Fearless Frank's horse Bill is leading, and the body is his."

"Call Rocket Rob and his men back," shouted Captain Starbuck.

But there was no need to do so, for they had not gone.

"They, too, recognized the horse of their comrade, and they felt sure that the body across the saddle was none other than that of Fearless Frank.

On came Buffalo Bill at a long, swinging gallop, Red Devil seeming to fret at being held back by the horse in lead, which hung back on the line.

All was speculation now with the crowd as to what it meant, and in silence they awaited for the coming of the only one who could explain.

Promptly Buffalo Bill drew rein before the post, leaped from the saddle, and handed the Express pouch and other things to Captain Starbuck, saying as he did so:

"The pouch carries a good value, sir, Pony Bob reported."

"All well along the line, sir."

All now had recognized the body across the saddle as that of Fearless Frank, and were waiting for Buffalo Bill to say more.

Having seen Captain Starbuck note down his time of arrival, and the value in the package, he then said:

"I am sorry, sir, to have to make a very sad report to you."

"Fearless Frank is dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"He left the ranch yesterday morning without leave to go hunting."

"Did he shoot himself, for I see he died by a bullet?"

"No, sir, I shot him," responded Buffalo Bill, turning from Captain Starbuck to the dead body of Fearless Frank, still tied to the saddle with his lariat, and at his words the eyes of the score of Pony Riders present gazed at the body in amazement, he standing unmoved under their gaze.

Even Wild Bill, who was ready to mount and carry the Express pouches which Buffalo Bill had just brought in, looked suspicious when the cool words were uttered:

"No, sir; I shot him!"

"You shot your comrade Fearless Frank, Buffalo Bill?" cried Captain Starbuck with astonishment.

"Yes, sir; it was my misfortune to have to do so."

"By accident of course?"

"No, sir; I fired to kill."

"Explain yourself, Cody?"

"I can only say, sir, that, in riding along the trail, this side of Wolf Den Pass, I saw a head dodge down behind some rocks."

"It at once struck me that I was in a trap, so I halted, awaiting for the head to reappear."

"When it did so a rifle was visible also, and I fired, as likewise did the one behind the rocks."

"The bullet grazed my cheek here, sir, as you see."

"I then ran on foot to the rocks, and to my amazement and sorrow I discovered that I had killed my comrade, Fearless Frank."

Not a word broke the silence of the crowd as Buffalo Bill made his report, and at his last words, Captain Starbuck asked:

"Was this going west or coming east?"

"It was going out yesterday morning, sir."

"Have you more to say?"

"Only that I concealed the body until my

return, and the horse, too, making no mention of the affair to the stations on the line."

"Anything else?"

"Pony Bob dashed through an ambush, sir, by making the outlaws believe cavalry was escorting him and so stampeded them."

"Good for Pony Bob! But now to your killing of Fearless Frank:"

"What is your opinion as to his presence there?"

Before Buffalo Bill could reply came the loud-spoken words:

"My opinion is that it was a downright murder and the murderer should hang for it!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE loud, angry voice that made this bold charge against Buffalo Bill riveted every eye upon the one who had uttered the words.

It was Jockey Jack, the most devoted friend of the dead man in camp, for the two were like brothers.

His face was livid now, and his eyes glared upon Buffalo Bill.

The latter merely turned toward him, an angry glance in his bright dark eyes, but he said no word.

He had made his report to his chief.

It was for him to speak.

Afterward, he would deal with the man who dared to accuse him of a crime so foul.

"Do you know what you are saying, Jockey Jack?" demanded Captain Starbuck.

"Yes, I know well, and I wish to make a charge against that man."

"Make it, then."

"I charge him, Buffalo Bill, with being the murderer of my friend, for some reason best known to himself, and for the crime he should be tried, and if guilty should hang."

"I further demand his arrest and being locked up until he is tried."

Before Captain Starbuck could reply, and he was forced to take notice of the charge made against his champion Pony Rider, and who stood unmoved under the accusation, Wild Bill faced Jockey Jack and said in his calm, cynical way:

"And I say to you, Jockey Jack, and to your three pards there, who, I see, are ready to back you up in your charge, that the man who accuses Buffalo Bill of crime, of being guilty of a mean act even toward a foe, is a sneaking coward and a liar, and I mean it for you."

There was no mistaking these words, and quick as a flash Jockey Jack's revolver was drawn, yet before he could pull trigger Wild Bill had sprung upon him and hurled him to the ground with an exhibition of strength that won general admiration, and rendering him senseless from the stunning fall.

"I am on duty now, but call on me, gentlemen, when you need me," continued Wild Bill, addressing himself to Rocket Rob and his immediate pards.

Then, turning to Captain Starbuck, he said in his quiet way:

"I am ready, sir."

"Go!"

With a leap Wild Bill was in his saddle and his horse bounded away on the long run eastward.

When he was gone Captain Starbuck turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"The charge having been made against you, Cody, that you killed Fearless Frank for cause, I must abide by our laws and make you a prisoner."

"But as you will have to start on your run to-morrow, if not found guilty, I will have the trial set down for to-night, so make what arrangements you can for your defense."

"Thank you, Captain Starbuck; but all I ask is that you send two reliable men, not of Rocket Rob's gang, to take the trail of Fearless Frank from the camp and follow it to the spot where he lost his life, while, if his immediate comrades will explain his reason for being there, and leaving camp without permission, as you said, it may serve as testimony in my behalf."

"Now, sir, I am ready to be locked up."

Deprived of his arms, Buffalo Bill was led away to what was known as the Lock-up, a cabin of stout logs where prisoners were kept.

He accepted the situation without a murmur, and ate a hearty breakfast, after which, having spent the last twenty-four hours in the saddle, he threw himself upon the blanket-bed and was soon fast asleep.

In the mean time Captain Starbuck had at once acted upon Buffalo Bill's suggestion and sent for three of the best skilled trailers in the camp to report to him ready for the road.

In a short while three Pony Riders rode up to the post, and going out Captain Starbuck said:

"Little Lone Star, you take charge and go to the corral, pick up the trail left by Fearless Frank's horse, in fact take the horse, for he will follow the same path he took before, and report all that you discover."

"From where you find the killing took place you need not go, as Buffalo Bill says that he carried the horse and body to hide them until his return."

"I shall await your return before I try the case, so lose no time more than is necessary."

The three Pony Riders saluted and rode away at once upon their mission.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRIAL.

THE scene at the post had cast a gloom over the entire camp, for there was not a man there who was so popular as was Buffalo Bill.

Fearless Frank had his friends too, but they were not very many, as his nature was a surly one.

Wild Bill was another popular man, and thus with three of their number suddenly taken from their midst, one by death, another a prisoner and the third, after his punishment of Jockey Jack, gone away for twenty-four hours, it might be never to return, the Pony Riders were in a very depressed mood.

Jockey Jack had risen from the ground, where Wild Bill had hurled him, thoroughly dazed.

Quick as he was known to be on the draw, he was not quick enough to prevent Wild Bill from giving him a severe lesson.

He had found his master and he was not one to forgive.

Jockey Jack was an Englishman, had ridden races in England, then spent a couple of years in the Australian bush, and coming to America had enlisted in the army and been a cavalryman.

Then he had turned Pony Rider and was known as an excellent man.

He was small, but tough as a pine knot, quick, active and an athletic, while he was known as a dead shot and a man not to trifle with.

His companions stood in certain awe of him, and he was proud of the fact.

To be humiliated by Wild Bill was a bitter pill for him to swallow, and there was but one way to wipe out, all said, the injury, and that was to demand satisfaction, although he had been the aggressor in accusing Buffalo Bill of a cowardly murder.

The day wore away and Buffalo Bill continued serenely sleeping as was his custom, until nearly dark, when he arose and had his dinner brought to him.

As he was eating it Little Lone Star and his two companions returned, leading Fearless Frank's horse.

All their horses showed that they had been hard ridden.

They reported their return to Captain Starbuck and then went to get their supper.

It was just nightfall when the bugle sounded from headquarters, calling the camp together.

Captain Starbuck, while in the army had also served as a bugler, and fond of playing the cornet he was wont to often wake the echoes of the hills with his ringing music, and always called his men together by its notes.

The moment they heard the call the crowds began to gather at the headquarters.

The eating room, the largest place that could be found in that primitive settlement, was made to do duty as a court-room, and there had gathered Captain Starbuck, who had dropped his military title for that of "judge," for he was a justice of the peace,

while near him was the prisoner, the witnesses and his accuser.

The crowd gathered as soon as possible, and when all was in readiness the judge declared that the court was open for the trial of William F. Cody, nicknamed Buffalo Bill, for the killing of his comrade, Fearless Frank.

Buffalo Bill sat unmoved, the only expression upon his handsome face that of weariness.

"Jockey Jack, you are the accuser in this case, so stand up, take the oath to tell only the truth and tell what you know," said the judge.

Jockey Jack arose, his face very pale, and a bruise upon his forehead where it had come in contact with the ground that morning when thrown down by Wild Bill.

He made the charge that his friend was murdered, as Buffalo Bill had never liked Fearless Frank, being envious of him.

"On the contrary Fearless Frank, my poor dead pard," he continued, "always liked Buffalo Bill, and had said to him, Jockey Jack, that it would be a good thing if the Pony Riders would go out singly and patrol the trail to prevent the outlaws from killing more of their number, and my pard had doubtless been on that errand when shot down by Buffalo Bill."

This was all that Jockey Jack had to say, and then his immediate pards expressed themselves as believing as he did, Rocket Rob saying:

"I hate to accuse Pard Cody, but it does look as if he had had it all his own way with poor Frank."

"Buffalo Bill, you have heard the charge of Jockey Jack?"

"I have, sir."

"You have heard that Rocket Rob, Phantom Phil and Daring Dick agree with his accusation?"

"I have, sir."

"State to the court fully your meeting with Fearless Frank, and just how he died."

"I will, sir, in a few words," and Buffalo Bill told the story over again, and substantially the same as when he first made his report.

But not once did he convey the idea that Fearless Frank had not been instantly killed by the shot.

"That is all that I have to say, sir," said he, as he finished his story and sat down.

Then Captain Starbuck said:

"Now, Little Lone Star, I will hear what you have to report of your trail this morning."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE THREE WITNESSES.

LITTLE LONE STAR took his name from his size and because he hailed from Texas.

He was a man universally respected, and his word was law among his comrades, while he was known as one of the best riders and deadliest shots on the frontier.

As a trailer he had the greatest skill, and his companions were wont to say that he could trail a rabbit over rocks.

When called upon by Captain Starbuck he advanced briskly, kissed the Bible, and said without further urging:

"We took the trail of Fearless Frank's horse from the corral."

"By we I mean Happy Harper, Devil Dan and myself."

"The horse left the corral on the jump, and kept up a gallop, so the tracks were deep, and we had no difficulty in following the trail."

"It made a flank movement around the ranch, then kept parallel with the Pony Riders' trail, and after keeping so for a long distance, branched off into a thicket before coming to Wolf Den Pass."

"Here the horse was hitched to a tree, and a handkerchief, folded on the ground, here it is, showed that he was muzzled to keep him from neighing."

"The tracks of a man led from the tree to which the horse had been hitched to a large rock some hundreds of yards away, and within easy range of the Pony Trail."

"The rock was nearly hidden by dwarf pines that grew about it; but we saw where some one had been lying in ambush there."

"I sent Devil Dan off to reconnoiter about

the place while Happy Harper and I looked over all signs about the rock.

The ground behind it was soft and the tracks revealed that Fearless Frank had stood there for some time.

"On top of the rock was the mark where a bullet had struck, and from the powder-burn there a rifle, or revolver, was resting on the rock when it was fired, and the man who pulled the trigger was the one who was waiting in ambush.

"Blood-stains were upon the ground and another man's track, and also the hoof-marks of two horses, one coming from in front, from the Pony Trail, the other from the thicket where Fearless Frank left his horse.

"The tracks of the two led away toward the cliffs bordering the stream, where Buffalo Bill must have hidden the body when he continued his run."

"You have given a very clear account, Little Lone Star, and I would ask your two comrades if they concur in it."

"You bet I do," said Devil Dan, while Happy Harper remarked:

"Yes, and more too."

"What is your opinion, Little Lone Star, from what you saw, regarding the killing of Fearless Frank by Buffalo Bill?"

"I'll give it flat-footed, though I hate to say anything against a dead man; but then the life of another man is at stake and so I give it as my opinion that Fearless Frank got tired of making money by drawing pay as a Pony Rider, and set out on his own hook to scoop in a big barrel."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, captain, that he slipped away from camp, took up his position in ambush, and waited for Buffalo Bill to come along."

"For what purpose?"

"For only one or all signs lie."

"Say what you think."

"I thought I had done so, but I'll come out plain."

"I believe Fearless Frank intended to shoot Buffalo Bill, rob him, skip back to camp and let the Cloven Hoofs get the credit of killing another Pony Rider, the best man that ever rode this trail."

"Is that plain, captain?"

"Decidedly."

"Do you have the same opinion Happy Harper?"

"I have."

"And you, Devil Dan?"

"Down to bedrock the same, Captain Starbuck, as Little Lone Star has."

"Have you more to state, Lone Star?"

"I have, sir, or rather Devil Dan has, for he made the discovery, though it does not bear on Fearless Frank exactly."

"What is it?"

"I said that I sent Devil Dan off to reconnoiter?"

"Yes."

"He went toward Wolf Den Pass."

"Well?"

"What did you find, Dan?"

In answer to Little Lone Star's question, Devil Dan said:

"I found, cap'n, I means judge, that there had been camped at the pass for some days a band of no less than a dozen horse-men."

"They had not left their camp long when I got there, for their fires among the rocks were still burning."

"This is surprising."

"Were they Indians?"

"Not an Injun; they was palefaces, Cloven Hoofs, for I found a mask on the ground. Here it is."

He handed the mask over for inspection.

It was black, and had on it just above the eye-holes a cloven hoof in scarlet.

"They had been there for some days, you say, Dan?"

"Yes, sir, for their grazing ground for their horses proved that, as did the ash-heaps of their fires."

"But, they could not have been, as Buffalo Bill has four times been through that pass of late."

"That is just what me and my two pals could not understand, judge, and would like to know how he got through," said Devil Dan, and every eye was turned upon Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ANONYMOUS ACCUSATION.

BUFFALO BILL did not flinch under the half a hundred pairs of eyes turned upon him, when Devil Dan said that he would like to know how he had gotten through Wolf Den Pass with it occupied by outlaws in ambush, and who had evidently been lying in wait there for days, until convinced that their presence there was known and no Pony Rider would come through.

"Buffalo Bill, will you answer the question of Devil Dan, as to how you got through Wolf Den Pass with the outlaws encamped there?" said Captain Starbuck, who was also mystified by what he had heard.

"I did not go through the pass, sir," was the quiet response.

"How could you do otherwise?"

"There was a way, sir."

"You did not go through the pass either time?"

"No, sir."

"There is no other way, for the cliffs on either side for miles are solid walls to the pass, as half the men here know."

It was Rocket Rob who spoke and it was evident that half the men in the room, if not more, agreed with him.

"You are mistaken, Rocket Rob, for there is another way as I took it going and coming," calmly replied Buffalo Bill.

"I say that there is not," yelled Rocket Rob.

"Don't fling the lie in my teeth for you may have to eat your words, if I am not proven guilty of murder at this trial," and Buffalo Bill's voice had a threatening ring to it.

"You'll never go free, for the testimony will hang you; but if you do, threats don't scare me."

"Silence, sir, for I am trying this case, and if you speak again, unless called upon by me to do so, I'll place you in the lock-up for ten days."

This stern command from the captain completely silenced Rocket Rob, and was a lesson to others, who felt sure the case would be tried on its merits.

Then turning to Buffalo Bill Captain Starbuck said:

"Buffalo Bill, I wish you to tell just how and where you got around the pass, and why you did not speak of it before?"

"I cannot tell you, sir, for it is a secret I am under a pledge not to divulge."

"But I left the trail and by a secret way flanked the pass going and coming and in that manner eluded the outlaws who were in ambush."

"How did you know that they were ambushed there?"

"I cannot tell that, sir."

"Why did you not report this before your return to camp?"

"That I could not do, sir, without making known how I flanked the pass after knowing the outlaws were there."

"I am sorry, Buffalo Bill, that you cannot tell this, or will not, for though I place little faith in any communication that the writer is too cowardly to put his name to, I yet find that your refusing to answer places just such a suspicion upon you as this paper, mysteriously left upon my desk to-day, implies."

"And what is that, sir?"

"I will read it aloud."

"It says."

"You will find out that where other Pony Riders are killed and fired upon, Buffalo Bill goes free."

"Where other riders fear to go on their runs, sure of certain death, Buffalo Bill goes, and gets through in safety."

"The mystery of this is that he has friends in the outlaw camp, and among the redskins, who spare him, but kill others, this being a compact between them for information given."

"Such is the communication, Cody."

The reading of this anonymous letter, mysteriously left upon the desk of Captain Starbuck, was listened to by all with amazement, not unmixed with indignation, by many.

Buffalo Bill seemed the least moved by it, and smiled serenely.

"Well, Cody, what have you to say to that letter?"

It is anonymous, you said, sir, hence the charge of a coward, and any man who would do a cowardly act will lie or steal.

"As it is a stab in the back, a shot from ambush, I cannot answer it, nor do I intend to more than to say that I put my record against any such charge."

"That is well said, Buffalo Bill; but the fact remains that suspicion is bad seed to sow, for, like weeds it takes root rapidly, and you should do or say something to show us how you came to avoid Wolf Den Pass, and the manner in which you did so, as also the reason for it, for if aware of the presence there of any of the Cloven Hoofs, you must have learned it from one of the band."

Captain Starbuck spoke seriously and earnestly.

He seemed anxious to shield Buffalo Bill, and annoyed that he would not answer the questions asked him.

There was a chance for him to explain all, yet he refused to give that explanation, and under such circumstances the unwitnessed killing of Fearless Frank, the charge of his having murdered him, and the anonymous letter, all certainly militated against him.

Buffalo Bill making no reply, a deep silence fell upon all, which was broken at last by Captain Starbuck saying, in almost a pleading voice:

"Once again I ask you, Buffalo Bill, if you will explain more fully the killing of Fearless Frank, how you came to avoid Wolf Den Pass, and how you did so, and knew that the outlaws were there?"

"I cannot answer, Captain Starbuck."

"Then I will answer for you, Buffalo Bill," cried a voice by an open window, and a moment after a woman, closely veiled, entered the frontier court-room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

ALL started as the rich-toned and clear voice fell upon their ears, and had a bomb-shell fallen into the room those gathered there would not have been more startled and surprised than to see a woman enter the door and walk straight toward Captain Starbuck.

"I have come to be a witness in this trial, Sir Judge, to tell what Buffalo Bill is pledged not to do, and to save him from what looks very much like a plot to destroy him, for I have listened to the trial as I stood outside by that window."

Every word was distinctly uttered and her reason for coming no one present could doubt after having heard her.

Buffalo Bill seemed more nonplused at seeing her than at the charges that had been made against him.

She was dressed in a black riding-habit that revealed her faultless, willowy form to perfection.

Upon her head was a black slouch army hat with a gold cord about it and a heavy sable plume upon one side.

Around the front of the hat was a dark, thick veil that completely shielded her face.

Her hands were gloved, and one held the skirt of her habit, the other a riding-whip, while in a belt about her slender waist were a pair of revolvers.

Captain Starbuck arose immediately with marked politeness, for the sight of a woman in that wild land was a novelty, a luxury, especially such a woman.

The whole crowd followed the court's example and were on their feet in an instant.

The "judge" offered her his chair, but she said in her sweet, mellow voice:

"Thank you, no, I will not sit down, for I came here merely as a witness, and having given my testimony, I wish to retire to the hotel, for I will claim your hospitality to-night—perhaps."

"The hotel is yours, miss; but may I ask who it is that we have the honor of welcoming?"

"I will tell you later, if necessary, to give you proof that my testimony is truthful."

"Now let me tell you that it was I who told Buffalo Bill that the Cloven Hoofs held Wolf Den Pass."

"I say I told him, but I should have

said warned him, for I put a warning letter on a stake in the trail.

"He obeyed my instructions, turned off and went by a secret trail, known only to me then, and never coming near me, and obeying my written orders, he was led to the Pony Trail again miles beyond where he left it.

"Still obeying orders he came back the same way, and the letter demanded that he should pledge himself to make known to no one the secret trail, or that he had had an Unknown Guide.

"Having told this, and shown how well he kept his pledge, I will now tell you that I was on the cliff near where he killed the man known as Fearless Frank.

"I had my glass, and I saw Fearless Frank go to the thicket, leave his horse, make his way to the rock, go into ambush and rest his rifle before him ready for use.

"I thought that it was a Pony Rider, intending to guard the trail, but I waited to see.

"I saw Buffalo Bill come into sight and the man behind the rocks prepared as though for action and I grew alarmed.

"Then Buffalo Bill halted suddenly, as though he had seen danger ahead, and he evidently had caught sight of the man peering over the rock.

"The next I beheld was a flash and report from the rifle over the rock, a flash from Buffalo Bill's revolver, and the one in ambush fell backward.

"Buffalo Bill ran on foot, revolver in hand, to the scene, and I saw him raise the fallen form and seem to care for his foe tenderly.

"Soon after he went off in search of the other's horse, and finding him led him up, strapping the body in the saddle and rode on, going by the secret path that I had no need to again guide him over.

"As for myself I am closely watching the Cloven Hoofs and for a purpose of my own, and which will be of benefit to the Pony Riders whom I have more than once warned of danger.

"Now you have my testimony, sir, and is it necessary for me to reveal who I am?"

"I should prefer it, lady, that we may know who has been such a timely witness of Buffalo Bill and so unexpected a one."

The woman hesitated a moment and then said:

"If I must, I must, I suppose," and raising her veil she looked straight into the face of the captain while Buffalo Bill cried in surprise:

"Little Sunbeam! The daughter of Gentleman George!"

"Miss Lena Ross, the stock-tender's daughter!" echoed Captain Starbuck.

But the girl made no reply, and lowering her veil again she glided toward the door.

There she turned, bowed and said simply:

"Good-night, gentlemen."

Such a cheer as broke from those in that room she had never heard before, and they were repeated when Little Lone Star called out:

"Three cheers and a tiger for Little Sunbeam!"

Then the deep voice of Captain Starbuck was heard calling all to order, and he said:

"Buffalo Bill, the charges against you are not proven, and you are therefore not guilty, having killed Fearless Frank to save your life—you are free."

Again cheer after cheer was given, and raising his hat in acknowledgment Buffalo Bill walked off with Captain Starbuck to find Little Sunbeam.

But she was not to be found anywhere.

No one had seen her come or go.

She had most mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S SECRET.

THE disappearance of the fair witness was as mysterious as her coming.

No one had seen her arrive at the ranch, and one man who had discovered a form crouching by the open window had supposed it was one of the stable boys.

No one had seen her go.

She had glided out of the door, supposedly to go to the living rooms in the tavern, and

the crowd, interested in the trial had not noticed which way she had gone.

When looked for she was not to be found, and all were surprised who knew the fact.

Captain Starbuck had consulted with Cody upon the strange circumstance, but he could tell nothing to account for it.

The captain had a motive for detaining Buffalo Bill that he might not come in contact with Rocket Rob and his pard.

He could not make laws in that wild land to prevent encounters, and he feared, after the matter had been settled that there might be trouble.

So he bade Buffalo Bill remain as he wished to speak to him.

When he found that the fair witness could not be found he said:

"What do you think of it, Bill?"

"I hardly know, sir."

"Could she have gone to any of the settlers' homes?"

"I do not know that her father is particularly friendly with any, sir."

"Would she dare go alone on the trail home?"

"Yes, sir, she knows no fear and would dare go anywhere alone."

"What had we best do about it?"

"I could go after her, sir, but she rides like the wind and is far away by this time, while if she heard me coming she would not let me overtake her."

"True, and you have riding enough to do without going upon a wild goose chase."

"But yet I do not like her being alone upon the trail."

"Nor I, sir, but I do not see just how we can help it, as she has over half an hour the start now."

"Well, let her go; but I am glad she came as a witness, for had she not I fear I should have had trouble did I take your word against the apparent evidence."

"Matters did begin to look a little dark for me, captain."

"Not for an instant did I doubt your story, but I could not be partial, and had to look at all as others did."

"Of course Jockey Jack wanted to see you strung up to avenge the death of his friend, no matter how killed, and then too that particular band, of which Rocket Rob is the leader, are envious of your success and deeds, and wanted you out of the way."

"Still, I did not think we had a traitor in camp, that Fearless Frank would really go out to rob a rider, killing him from ambush of course, and let it be placed to the credit of the Cloven Hoofs."

"Nor did he, captain."

"He went there for another purpose."

"You know something that you did not divulge."

"Captain Starbuck, what I tell you must be a secret between us."

"Certainly, Bill."

"I told nothing more than I had to, for the reason that I did not wish to give myself away."

"I kept secret some important facts to serve me in getting at the truth, and discovering certain things by holding back a trump card to play at the proper time."

"Now I will tell two others the whole story, and they are Wild Bill and Pony Bob, for we three are sworn pards."

"You shall hear also what my secret is."

"Well, Cody, you are a very strategic worker and I have perfect confidence in you, as also in Wild Bill and Pony Bob, as you know."

"I am glad also that you are going to take me into your confidence in this matter, for if more trouble follows I will be posted and know how to act."

"In the first place, Captain Starbuck, I did not kill Fearless Frank instantly."

"Ah!"

"When I saw the head over the rock, I fired, supposing it to be an outlaw."

"He returned the fire, and I shot a second time, just as he did so."

"He did not intend to kill and rob me I do not think, but when I fired, he decided on the instant to kill me to protect himself."

"I found him dying, and, poor fellow, he made a clean breast of it."

"You may imagine my feelings when I found that it was Fearless Frank whom I had shot."

"His dying confession to me was that he

and his pards, Rocket Rob and his band, were jealous of me.

"They could not understand how I went through unscathed, while other Pony Riders fell."

"They also saw that Wild Bill and Pony Bob did the same, so they marked us for ruin."

"They knew that we must be in league with the Mormons, the Indians and the outlaws; that we three rode blood-bay horses and dressed in buckskin as designating to the outlaws that we were friends."

"We went through and posted the Cloven Hoofs whom to kill and rob among the Pony Riders."

"This was all suspicion, mind you, but to make it a fact, they decided to play the spy upon me."

"Fearless Frank was the first spy, but I did not let Rocket Rob and the others know that he made a confession before dying, and that I was onto their little game."

"Holding their secret, we can thwart their play, for we hold trumps."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TALK WITH THE CAPTAIN.

"WELL, Bill, you are a wonder!"

Such was the expression of Captain Starbuck, who, seated in his own room, had listened most attentively to the story that Buffalo Bill had to tell, the secret that he had to divulge.

"I could never have been on trial, as you were for your life, for seeming proof of guilt, as you know, would have hanged you, and not have divulged the whole affair, and few men are there who could have done as you did."

"Why, you were the most unmoved man of all of us."

"I saw no reason to be otherwise, sir."

"But, suppose the crowd, for they are the jury here, had decided that you were guilty, as I fear they would have done had it not been for that lonely and fearless girl, whom her father should never have brought to this desperate land?"

"I should simply have asked several days grace, and have communicated with her, as she told me how to do, and have her prove that I had been led by a secret way around the pass, and also to have her tell of my killing Fearless Frank."

"Then, you knew that she was aware of the fact?"

In answer, Buffalo Bill simply took from his pocket the letter from his Unknown Guide, offering to be a witness in his favor if she was needed.

"Well, this is remarkable."

"You had this proof in your pocket and would not produce it."

"I had no right to do so, unless my life depended upon it, I considered."

"And, you had already sent for her, then?"

"No, sir; her coming was as much a surprise to me as to you."

"And, when she revealed who she was, it amazed me."

"Yes, sir; I have not recovered from my astonishment yet."

"And you did not suspect her?"

"Not in the slightest degree."

"How came she to know of the trial?"

"I wish I knew, sir."

"She appeared at the right time."

"Yes, sir; just when she was needed."

"She is a very remarkable girl, and I shall get for her one of the gold life badges the company gives to its men for distinguished services."

"It would be an honor, sir, that she would appreciate, I know, as I would, for though, as you are aware, I have three of them, I prize each one most highly."

"And you are likely to get three more of them at the rate you are now traveling toward that end."

"But, about that girl?"

"Yes, sir. Please do not yet ask for the badge for her, but wait until her work is finished, as she is still seeking to aid us."

"I will do as you suggest, Bill."

"But, tell me, do you know anything about her father?"

"No, sir; he is a mystery to me."

"And to me."

"He is a gentleman, refined, courtly in his manners, splendidly educated, with nothing of the rough about him, yet content to settle in this country of desperadoes, outlaws and Indians, and, what is more, to bring here his daughter, a girl fitted to shine in the best society of the land.

"Never seeking trouble, in truth avoiding it as much as he can, he yet can be bullied by no man, and is as dangerous a piece of humanity to face in anger as any one on this frontier.

"Why the last time I went over the trail inspecting, he and his daughter treated me like a prince.

"They sung for me, and it was fine music and I have heard the best when a soldier, for the officers and their wives were often cultivated musicians.

"He had books on scientific subjects, is a fine geologist, and I declare I cannot understand their coming here to live.

"In fact there is but one solution of the mystery."

"And what is that, sir?"

"That Gentleman George has either committed some great crime, or is accused of it, and has been forced to seek a hiding-place among these wilds."

"That is the motive that has driven many a man here, sir; but the real criminal most generally becomes a desperado after coming, and I cannot regard Gentleman George Ross as ever having been a bad man."

"Nor can I.

"But solve the mystery if you can."

Buffalo Bill shrugged his shoulders but made no reply, and Captain Starbuck continued:

"Now, Buffalo Bill, you are going to steer clear of Rocket Rob and his gang?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I hope there will be no trouble, no encounter."

"I hope not, sir, for I want no trouble.

"I shall in my turn play the spy, and keep my eyes on them; but I shall seek no difficulty, and only when driven do so, will I resent their meddling with my affairs."

"All right, I cannot blame you for that; but it is nearly midnight, and you need rest, so go to your quarters now, for you go out on your run to-morrow, and I am more than ever interested to know the result," and offering his hand, Buffalo Bill grasped it warmly and at once went to his quarters and turned in, greatly impressed by the occurrences of the day.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PONY RIDER AT REST.

THE feeling among the Pony Riders, and others in the camp, after the trial was over, was, that a mistake had been made not to have taken Buffalo Bill's story without doubt or comment.

Fearless Frank had certainly sent in word at roll-call that he was ill.

Instead he had gone away and his comrades had so taken in a false report.

He had gone without leave, and had no business away.

He certainly had no right to be lying in ambush on the Pony Trail unless he had gone there for an evil purpose.

His jealousy of Buffalo Bill was well known, and if he had not gone to rob him, he might have gone to put him out of the way.

The testimony of Little Lone Star over his two companions showed that Fearless Frank had gone to the rock, hidden his horse and was lying in ambush.

Hence the Pony Riders argued among themselves that the word of Buffalo Bill should have settled the affair and Rocket Rob, Jockey Jack and the others did wrong to make an issue of it.

When Buffalo Bill had said that he had flanked the Wolf Den Pass going and coming, taking a secret trail to do so, they should have believed him, for no one could have learned of his own knowledge that there was not a secret trail.

But in the end all had come out in favor for Buffalo Bill, and the testimony of his fair volunteer witness had made Fearless Frank appear as one who had gone to kill and rob Buffalo Bill, rather than as one who had had some less wicked motive.

The general decision in the different cabins was, therefore, that Rocket Rob and his followers had "put their foot in it."

They had been reduced, by the death of Fearless Frank to a quartette, and Little Lone Star promptly called them the 'Fool Quartette.'

That there would be trouble follow the trial not a Pony Rider doubted, for they did not believe that Buffalo Bill would allow such pronounced ill-will as they revealed toward him to go unnoticed.

"When they seen the black light they was put in by Fearless Frank's actions they should have come right out and said Buffalo Bill had been badly treated," said one.

"Yes, it would have been the manly thing to do and made it much more pleasanter all around," another remarked.

"Well, I don't see as Buffalo Bill is called on to take notice of their ill will.

"It was in the trial and he came out on top, and I hopes he'll drop the affair," a Pony Rider remarked.

"Yes, it would best, for we want no trouble among ourselves."

"Bill hain't no fellow to look up fights, so I guess he won't worry them."

"No, but when they gits him in one, he's generally the last man to git out."

"True you are, pard.

"But if he don't notice the Fool Quartette, as Little Lone Star nicknamed the Rocket Rob gang, there will be one who will."

"Who is that?"

"Wild Bill."

"You bet he'll go for Jockey Jack's scalp, for Wild Bill will stand no trifling."

This seemed to be the general opinion, that there would be trouble when Wild Bill returned.

Then the fair witness was discussed, and all gave her the greatest praise for her pluck and valuable services.

But no one could understand just how Little Sunbeam, the stock tender's daughter, could know so much about the movements of the Cloven Hoofs.

As they could not solve this mystery they gave it up and went to bed.

In the mean time over in the large cabin of the Rocket Rob clique there was a shadow resting.

Rocket Rob and his three companions had returned from the trial considerably crestfallen.

They had hoped to down Buffalo Bill and in turn had been downed.

They had played and lost.

Their first spy had lost his life.

And more, he had been killed and in the minds of all had left the belief that he had tried to kill and rob Buffalo Bill.

In their own minds it was not just certain that it was not so, for appearances were certainly against Fearless Frank.

Perhaps, they thought, the temptation had been too much for him, for he suspected Buffalo Bill carried a large sum of money.

In the cabin lay the dead form of Fearless Frank, covered with a blanket.

The four pards sat discussing the affair until late, and also talking over the return of Wild Bill.

They, too, expected trouble when Wild Bill came back, for Jockey Jack had decided that there should be, and he was not one to back down from any man, and he also had perfect confidence in himself, and his comrades had in him.

At last all was quiet in the camp, and only the whining of the skulking coyotes broke the silence of the night.

Bright and early the camp was astir, and the four pards got ready to bury their dead comrade.

The Pony Riders straggled over to the cabin in twos and threes, and at last the body was taken up by Rocket Rob and his pards, and borne slowly away to the little burying-ground over in the valley.

The others followed behind, and to the surprise of all Captain Starbuck was there, for they had not supposed he would come to the burial of one he deemed killed in a lawless act.

But he read the burial service over Fearless Frank, and mounting his horse rode away.

But Buffalo Bill was not there

He was in his cabin, preparing for his westward run as soon as Wild Bill should come in from the east with the pouches.

He did not think it would have been in good taste to go to the burial of the man his hand had taken the life of.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BEHIND TIME.

BUFFALO BILL reported at the arriving and starting-post promptly, ready for another risk of life in his run to Valley Farm and back again, as rapidly as horseflesh could make it.

The crowd were already on hand, every man in and around Headquarters Ranch that could get there.

They were still excited over the happenings of the past few days, and were anxious to see what else would occur.

The seventh Pony Rider had gone under, in Fearless Frank, in the last month, and the incidents attending the death of each one had been exciting in the extreme.

Wild Bill was coming in with an unfinished quarrel with Jockey Jack, and Buffalo Bill was to go out once more on the most dangerous run of the entire Pony Trail, and yet one that a young girl had dared to come over and return by night, to serve as a witness in his favor.

The report of Little Lone Star that the Cloven Hoofs had men encamped for several days at the Wolf Den Pass, proved how earnest they were to entrap a Pony Rider.

Buffalo Bill, all thought, was most likely to find them ambushed somewhere else along the run.

Could it be that he would again be so fortunate as to give them the slip?

Could it be possible that Little Sunbeam, the stock tender's daughter would once more be able to warn him of the trap set for him?

It did not seem as though it could, and those who had before counted upon Buffalo Bill's going through in safety now felt that he would not do so.

As he came up the crowd greeted him with a cheer, which he responded to by raising his hat and a quiet:

"Thank you, boys!"

It was observed that Rocket Rob, Phantom Phil, Jockey Jack and Daring Dick were there, all standing close together, and looking very serious after the burial of their friend.

As for Buffalo Bill he was unmoved as usual, and his eyes by a quick glance, evidently took in the fact that Rocket Rob and his pards did not join in the cheer given him.

Buffalo Bill, it was observed, carried a couple of revolvers in his belt, and he held in his hand a third, a very large weapon in a holster, with straps to fasten upon his saddle-horn.

He evidently expected trouble and was prepared for it.

"Bill means business," whispered Little Lone Star, and Devil Dan to whom she addressed the remark, answered:

"He is right, too."

"Did yer see him take in at a glance, whether any of Rocket Rob's gang was missing?" asked Happy Harper.

"Yes, and that they did not cheer him, too," added Little Lone Star.

The agent now came out and as he did so glanced at his watch.

"Wild Bill is five minutes late," he said.

A dozen watches came out, and a murmur went the rounds as Buffalo Bill replied:

"My watch makes him seven minutes late, Captain Starbuck."

"You are doubtless right, Bill, for your watch is the best in the country," said the agent, glancing at the very elegant time-piece which the company had presented to Buffalo Bill, and it was said had paid five hundred dollars for the watch and chain.

"It never varies a second, sir."

Captain Starbuck set his time with Buffalo Bill, the others doing the same, from those that owned a brass time-piece to those who had fine watches.

Then all looked anxious as Wild Bill was not yet in sight, and the trail could be seen for nearly a mile away.

Where Buffalo Bill never showed a trace of anxiety on his own account, he was seen to look quite uneasy now at his friend not being on time.

"Ten minutes late, sir," he said, glancing again at his watch.

Thus the minutes went by until nearly half an hour passed, and the Pony Rider did not appear.

At last Buffalo Bill said:

"He is just half an hour behind, sir."

"May I take Lone Star and his two pards, and go up the trail to see what is wrong?"

"Certainly, more men, if you like."

"No, sir, four of us will do," and telling Juniper to take Red Devil back for his Express ride, and bring him another horse, Buffalo Bill waited until it was done, and with Little Lone Star, Happy Harper and Devil Dan, who came up mounted just then, rode off on the trail of the missing Pony Rider.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WILD BILL'S TRAIL.

WILD BILL's trail led along two valleys, across a plain and over a high range of mountains.

It was a long run of a hundred miles, but except ascending and descending the mountains, it was an easy one for the horses.

It was so mapped out that it could not be made much shorter, and the Pony Riders who had been on that run had never objected to it on account of the beat being some miles longer than the others were.

Buffalo Bill had been the last to ride it, before Wild Bill was put on, and the former met him at the other end, and Pony Bob was still further on.

The deaths along the run between Headquarters Ranch and Valley Farm, caused Buffalo Bill to be placed there, with Wild Bill on his beat, and Pony Bob to meet him at the other end, thus having the three sworn pards to meet each other and be on a continuous string, on the three most dreaded runs on the whole Pony Trail.

To climb the mountain, Wild Bill always rode a large, strong horse, taken at the station just at the foot of the range.

Upon the other side at the base of the mountain was another relay station, and the two men but ten miles apart, but then that made up in hard climb what the run lacked in distance.

Wild Bill had started on his return run to Headquarters Ranch with a very valuable freight.

"It was all in money too, going through to California, where a man had ordered it sent in that way."

"You've got enough to tempt many a man to bolt with it, Wild Bill, and I'm glad that you are the man to take it through."

"Then it goes into Buffalo Bill's hands and he turns it over to Pony Bob, so it's all safe."

"It came through with a force of soldiers to where it struck my division, and Pony Bob is to leave it at Fort Utah, so it can go on from there in company with a force of cavalry going westward, so, if you, Buffalo Bill and Pony Bob get through without being killed, it's likely to reach its destination in safety, but the man was a fool to chance it, and I hope no one else will send such a run over the line."

So said the agent of the division that joined Captain Starbuck's, and who had come on with half a dozen Pony Riders as a guard until he reached the station where he would meet Wild Bill, and which was the end of his line.

He was anxious to get the money across his division in safety.

"How much money is there, captain?" asked Wild Bill calmly.

"Ah! I forgot to give you the way transfer."

"Here it is, and you see there is thirty thousand dollars in greenbacks there."

"All right, you got her through your division in safety and I guess we can get her through ours."

"Yes, I hope so; but then yours is properly called 'The Deadly Division' you know."

"And it has earned its name, captain; but I am ready, sir."

With a leap into his saddle Wild Bill was off, for the well-trained horses knew just

what was expected of them, and, nervous at delay, after they were brought out of the stable, they were away the moment the rider's foot touched the stirrup, or they saw him about to leap into the saddle.*

It took a wonderfully active man and splendid rider to mount one of the horses of the Pony Express, when they started off from a station on their run.

Wild Bill held his horse at his speed mile after mile, and from relay to relay.

The changes of the saddle and Express pouches at the stations was a minute's work, and only a word was had with the stock-tender.

The station at the base of the mountain was reached on time, and one of the two men then said:

"I'll detain you a minute, Wild Bill, to tell you something."

"All right, pard, out with it."

"I was up on the mountains yesterday looking for one of the horses that run off, and I found him on the range, just at dark."

"As I looked over the trail you go, I saw a firelight."

"Yes."

"It was just on the trail and all of five miles from the base of the mountain."

"Could you place it closer than that, pard?"

"You know the Pinnacle Rocks?"

"Yes."

"There is a clump of timber just to the right of the Pinnacle Rocks."

"I know it."

"As near as I can place the camp-fire it was there."

"All right, and thank you, pard."

"Being forewarned is being forearmed—good-by," and Wild Bill was away.

With great bounds the horse began the ascent of the mountain and only when he reached the summit showed signs of weakening, for Wild Bill had pushed him harder than usual.

He wished to gain a little time.

Springing from his horse, and keeping him back in shadow, he took a small field-glass from the case swung to his belt, and peered over the valley through which the trail ran from the base of the mountain.

He saw the winding Pony Trail, followed it along until his eyes fell upon the Pinnacle Rocks and there rested.

For a couple of minutes he swept the surrounding space about the rocks, and then said in his cynical manner natural to him:

"That's a game that two can play."

"I'm onto you, gentlemen."

With this he went back to his horse, mounted, and went over the summit at a run, slacking up only when he came to the descent on the other side.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE GAME THAT TWO COULD PLAY.

Down the steep trail rode Wild Bill, his face as calm as a mill pond, his eyes on the lookout, his thoughts busy.

The relay station at the base of the mountain was where he was allowed to stop of fifteen minutes for breakfast.

The men could see him coming far up the mountain-side, and so had breakfast ready for him upon his arrival.

They were ready for him this time, and as he dismounted one of the three men took his horse and remarked:

"You've been pushing him some, Wild Bill?"

"Yes, I am a little ahead of time."

"Breakfast is all ready, Wild Bill, bacon, hoe-cake, venison steak and coffee."

"And I am ready for breakfast, for the mountain gave me an appetite."

"Any news back on the trail, Bill?"

"I heard none."

"Have you seen any one on the trail since I passed?"

"Not a soul."

"I guess all is clear."

Wild Bill ate his breakfast with a decided

* Buffalo Bill once won a large wager on his "Pones" by stating that they would go through the run without a fall, and on time from station to station. There were ten horses entered in the run, fresh animals being saddled and sent off at each relay and the run of one hundred miles was made twenty minutes ahead of time by the well-trained ponies without a rider. — THE AUTHOR.

relish, and not like a man over whose head hung a dread of death, that within one hour he might be a corpse.

He then mounted his fresh horse and was off like a flash.

Pressing his horse even harder than usual he drew rein when within a quarter of a mile of the Pinnacle Rocks and said:

"I'm just twenty five minutes ahead, and I hope I won't be delayed longer than that."

"Old horse, I must hide you here, and if I don't turn up again Buffalo Bill will find you."

"I'll just leave a note for fear I might go under."

He had gone off the trail to a thicket, and there dismounting, muzzled his horse and hitched him securely.

Taking a pencil and slip of paper from his pocket, he wrote:

"Give this to Buffalo Bill, who will find the Express pouches, which are valuable, hidden where he killed a grizzly bear three months ago, near Pinnacle Rocks."

"WILD BILL."

This slip of paper was fastened to his saddle-horn, and taking the Express and mail "freight," as the Pony Riders called it, Wild Bill walked rapidly away, going down toward a dry creek bed.

Following this for a short distance, he came to a pile of rocks.

"It was upon that one the grizzly was sunning himself when Bill saw him and brought him down."

"I'll leave the freight up there, for no one will see it in passing, but Buffalo Bill will know where to look for it if I go under."

With this he hid the saddle pouches on the rock, and then walked rapidly on up the bed of the stream.

By this means he made a flank movement of a mile, coming out in the trail beyond Pinnacle Rocks.

Reconnoitering carefully, he began to approach the rocks, which from this side he was enabled to do under shelter, while from the other direction he could not have done so.

Looking at his watch, after going a short distance, he said:

"If I had ridden straight on, I would just be due here now on time."

"But, it is worth being behind if I do what I hope to."

"How many are there I soon will know, for their horses are in yonder thicket of pines."

He turned his glass upon the thicket, searched it carefully, and then moved on.

When he got to the pines he saw three horses hitched there.

"Three of them, are there?"

"Well, I've met three men before and came out on top—no, one is a pack-horse, so I will have only two to handle."

He glanced at the horses; saw that two of them were saddled and a third carried a pack.

All three were hitched to trees, and ready for departing quickly if need be.

It was just three hundred yards from the pine thicket to the Pinnacle Rocks by which the Pony Trail led.

These rocks were odd in shape, like steeples, and were at the end of a ledge running out from a range beyond the pine thicket.

Along this ledge Wild Bill crept, for it offered a good protection to him, and at last came to within a hundred feet of the group of rocks.

There he knew that the ones in ambush were awaiting him, and they had been encamped in the pines awaiting his return. Nearer and nearer he crept, going from rock to rock, his revolver in his hand, as though he was about to flush some game and was ready to shoot on the wing.

Presently he halted behind a rock which he knew, if he passed beyond, would bring him in sight of his foes.

He knew the place they must be, for often had he passed there before.

When he was ready to act he passed around the rock and his face lighted with a grim smile.

The game that two could play was about to begin, the cards were dealt and Wild Bill felt that he held trumps, if the odds were against him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOUGHT TO A FINISH.

WHAT Wild Bill saw would have caused many a man to slip quietly away, mount his horse and make a wide flank movement to avoid his foes, if he could do so, though the nature of the country just there was such that he could not have gotten by on either side on horseback without discovery, the chances being a hundred to one that he would be seen.

Still he could have gotten his Express pouches, and mounting one of the outlaws' horses have ridden on.

Then he could have returned to the relay station at the base of the mountain, five miles back, and gotten aid there to come and capture or kill the outlaws.

But Wild Bill was not that kind of a man.

The Cloven Hoofs warred upon the Pony Riders because they carried treasure with them about half the time.

These men in ambush must be Cloven Hoofs, and they were waiting for him to come along.

They should find him he was determined.

They were there to kill him as an Indian would, from ambush, without the claim the redskin had to do so as being his natural foe, for these were men of his own race.

It was gold they wanted, or its equivalent, and Wild Bill determined that he had, instead, lead to give them.

Peering at them he saw that they were very safely located from danger approaching them in the opposite direction.

One was upon one side of the trail, and he was sitting behind a rock some four feet in height and against which his rifle leaned.

The other was just across the trail, perhaps thirty feet from his comrade, and he also had a natural fortification.

It was a fine place to fight from if their enemy came from the other direction.

But unfortunately for their calculations the enemy had flanked them.

They looked for no foe from that direction, for the Pony Rider was due from the eastward.

"I say, pard, hain't he behind a little?" called out the man on the left to the one on the right of the trail.

"I guess he may be, but not having a watch I don't know.

"Maybe it seems so because we is anxious."

"Yas, and if the report come true to us we'll get enough dust to quit this biz and live like gents."

"So we will, and we'll move away in a hurry, for if the captain or any of the gang were onto our secret racket of gettin' the plunder and slippin' away with it they'd roast us alive."

"You bet they would.

"But we must make no escape this time, but both pull trigger to kill, and never halt him, for it's Wild Bill you know."

"Yes, we don't want no muss with him, for he's about as quick to draw and hard to tackle as Buffalo Bill."

"Shoot when he reaches that pine yonder."

"Don't mind me, but aim for his head and pull trigger the moment his horse reaches the stone there."

"I'll do it, and you pull for his heart."

"I'll get there, never fear," was the answer.

Could they have seen Wild Bill then, the cynical smile on his face, and his revolver in hand it would have sent the blood rushing to their hearts to see how cleverly he had flanked them, beating them at their own game.

Having apparently enjoyed the situation for a moment, and heard all that was said, listened to the plot of the two outlaws to kill him, rob him, and then with their booty to desert the band, Wild Bill was deciding how to "call them," when the one on the left said impatiently:

"I tell you he's behind time."

"No, pard, just on time," was Wild Bill's reply and he stepped fairly out from behind the large rock that had sheltered him, determined to take all chances.

With wild yells the two men sprung to their feet grasping at their rifles, but there

came the crack of Wild Bill's revolver and one of them fell never to rise.

Quickly he turned upon the other man, who had thrown himself upon the rock and was scrambling over for shelter before attempting to fire, for he knew the danger came from behind him.

The Pony Rider's revolver cracked a second time and the man gave a yell, but went down behind the rock, while Wild Bill realizing his danger now from the other's rifle, sprung to cover also.

He felt that he had not killed the man, though was sure he had not missed him as the yell he gave was one of pain.

The moment he got shelter Wild Bill took in the situation and saw that he could keep under shelter and almost flank the rock his foe was behind.

Quickly he sprung across an open space to a rock near by, and just as he got there a rifle bullet cut near him.

But a short run brought him to a high rock which he could ascend and peer over and down open the outlaw.

"Hands up, pard, for I've got you," he called out, but the answer was another shot.

"See here, pard, I can kill you if I wish, but I want a talk with you, so say hands up!"

Another shot was the reply.

"All right, let me give you a hint that I've got you foul, for you seem to doubt it.

"Look out for a slight clip."

The revolver of Wild Bill flashed as he uttered the last word and the outlaw yelled out quickly:

"Don't kill me! my hands is up!"

"Come right out from behind that rock, and leave your weapons there!"

The man obeyed.

"Now turn your back to me!"

Again the order was obeyed, and slipping down from the rock Wild Bill peered around it before going out, for he was not going to be tricked.

But there stood his man with his hands raised above his head.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RECOGNITION.

FOR Wild Bill to pass his hands about the man and see that he had no weapons concealed on his person, was the work of an instant.

He also saw that he had been wounded by each of his shots, once in the neck slightly, and which had been the "hint" for him to surrender, and also in the arm, also a flesh wound.

"Well, pard, I'll dress your wounds as well as I can, and then you will have to do some rapid riding with me, for already I'm a quarter of an hour behind time, and it will be that much more before we can start," and in talking to his prisoner Wild Bill looked him over carefully.

He was a full-bearded, long-haired man of forty, with a face which crime had stamped all over with evil.

His eyes glared at his captor, and he looked like one who was completely crushed.

"I never seen you before, but I guesses you is Wild Bill."

"Yes, you guess well.

"What made you think I was Wild Bill?"

"Waal, your style is about like what you've just done, from all I've heard of you.

"They say that you and Buffalo Bill and Pony Boy is the wu'st on the trail."

"Oh, no, we're not bad; but come, off with your coat and I'll look at your wounded arm, for I don't wish you to bleed to death."

"No, you want ter keep me for hangin'."

"Maybe," and Wild Bill bound his own handkerchief around the wound, which was in the fleshy part of the arm, and then tied the prisoner's hands behind his back with the silk scarf he took from about his neck.

"Now we'll see to your friend," and he walked to where the body of the other outlaw lay, a bullet wound in his temple.

"Now, pard, we'll go after the horses. Come!"

They went to the thicket, and aiding the man to mount, Wild Bill tied his feet beneath the horse, and then released his hands.

"Here, you lead the pack-horse," he said, and handing the rein to the prisoner he led the other animal back to where the body lay.

Strapping the dead form to his saddle, and tying the weapons of both men to the pack-horse, Wild Bill leaped upon the latter and said:

"Come right along, for I've got no time to lose."

He rode quickly back to where he had left his own horse, and mounting him set off for the rock where the pouches were hidden.

These were soon secured, and as Wild Bill regained the trail at Pinnacle Rocks he said:

"I am just thirty-five minutes behind, and I will lose more time, hampered as I am by a prisoner, dead man and pack-horse; but you all go through with me, you bet."

The prisoner did not appear to like the arrangement, but he could but submit.

The dead body of his comrade was there to remind him of how close had been his call, and his wounds, though not severe, were painful.

"I don't think I kin ride very fast, pard," he said.

"I only ask you to ride as fast as the horse goes, and I'll see that he don't loaf," was the reply.

"Whar is yer goin' ter take me?"

"To the Pony Riders' Headquarters of this district."

"What will they do with me?"

"Hang you, I guess."

"Oh Lord!

"What has I done?"

"Nothing of course."

"I hain't so bad, pard."

"I don't just see how you could be worse."

"Maybe I could buy my way free."

"What have you got to offer?"

"You want to know something about the Cloven Hoofs?"

"I think I know enough about them."

"You don't know what I can tell you."

"What can you tell?"

"Enough to make you think it is worth more than hanging a poor devil like me."

"We shall see later just what you are worth," said Wild Bill and he pushed the horses as fast as he could go, hampered as he was with the body, the prisoner and the pack-animal.

The next station was reached three quarters of an hour behind time, but he smiled in his grim way when one of the men at the relay said:

"What's being behind, Wild Bill, to carrying in with you what you do and saving your own life, too?"

As he wished to carry in his capture, just as it was, and the next halting-place was the Home Ranch, Wild Bill only changed his own horse for a fresh arrival, letting the outlaw's horses make the whole distance.

"Well, if there is not Buffalo Bill coming after me.

"I might have known he would do so when I was not on time," said Wild Bill as he suddenly saw come around a bend in the trail Buffalo Bill, Little Lone Star, and two other horsemen.

They were coming on at a rapid pace, and the prisoner fairly groaned as he saw them, and said:

"It's Buffalo Bill, and that cooks my goose."

"Why?"

But the man seemed to feel he had made a mistake in saying what he did, and kept quiet.

In a few minutes more Buffalo Bill and his companions gave a yell, waved their hats, and came tearing forward to meet Wild Bill, who called out:

"I'm behind, Bill, old pard; but, you see, I was detained by company."

"Yes, and you've brought your company along, I see."

"You had a close call, old man, and I congratulate you."

"And you were going to look me up?"

"Yes, for I feared trouble; but, do you know this man, Wild Bill?"

"Not intimately."

Buffalo Bill had his piercing eyes fixed upon the prisoner, who tried to keep his face hidden.

"Do you know him, pard?"

"Yes, it is Kit Kirby, the man known as the Red Dante."

"I hain't no such thing."

"I'm a bad man, I admit, but I'm not the Red Danite, Buffalo Bill," cried the prisoner, eagerly.

"You are the Mormon whose cruel deeds forced Brigham Young to outlaw you, and I know you as the man who led the Indians to attack and massacre an emigrant train, and I have heard that you had joined the Cloven Hoofs.

"No, I never forget a face.

"You and I have met several times before, and I'll take oath that you are Kit Kirby, the Danite, renegade and outlaw.

"Wild Bill, you have made a grand capture," and wheeling about the whole party rode rapidly on toward the ranch.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RED HAND, THE DANITE.

As they rode along side by side, Wild Bill told his pard how he had gotten wind of a supposed ambush and had flanked his foes.

Lone Star and his two comrades came close behind, each one leading a horse of Wild Bill's capture, thus leaving the two friends to talk together.

"I did think, Buffalo Bill, that we could make terms with this prisoner to betray the others of his band, but if he is the man you say he is, the Red Danite, it will never do to let him go on any account."

"No, indeed, for he is a deserter from the army, you know, and killed an officer the day he made his escape.

"Then he joined the Mormons, and became a captain in their Legion, but he was such a fiend Brigham Young tried him for his crimes and he was sentenced to be shot.

"Again he escaped and went to live with the Indians, and led them in an attack on a train of emigrants.

"The next I heard of him was that he had become lieutenant of the Cloven Hoofs."

"You have met him, then?"

"Yes, when he was a soldier, and afterward when he was a Danite Captain, and I know that he is the man.

"But Captain Starbuck will know, for he was in the same company with him when he was in the army, so do not say who he is, but give him a chance to recognize him."

"You never make mistakes in faces, Pard Bill, and I should not wonder if you are right.

"If Captain Starbuck recognizes him, that settles it, and we will have to take some other plan to catch the Cloven Hoofs than through his treachery."

"Yes, and I believe I know the way, Wild Bill, though I can say no more now."

"I can wait."

"You shall know in good time, or rather when I really know anything myself; but now let me ask you about your trouble with Jockey Jack."

"What about it?"

"It was on my account, and I hope it will not go any further."

"Oh, no, I am satisfied, though he may not be."

"I think he is anxious to renew it."

"I never seek trouble, and I never dodge it."

"I know that, pard; but now let me tell you what has happened since you left."

"I was afraid there were some who wanted to make trouble for you."

"They did."

"I'll tell you about it," and Buffalo Bill told the story of the killing of Fearless Frank, the trial and of the fair witness who had come to his rescue.

"Well, that was a noble act, but I never knew of any secret trail over those cliffs, Bill."

"Nor did I, until she revealed it to me."

"How on earth did Little Sunbeam find it out?"

"It is all a mystery to me."

"And how does she know so well the movements of the Cloven Hoofs?"

"I answer you I do not know, and it puzzles me greatly."

"There is something in all this to fathom, Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, and I am not going to leave the mysterious trail until I see the end of it, unless a Cloven Hoof should pick me off."

"But, pard?"

"Well?"

"It is said that all is fair in love and war, and I think, as we dare not make terms with your prisoner, we might at least allow him to believe we may, and, without any promises or pledges to him, find out all we can that he will tell."

"So I think, and the captain is the very man to do that."

"But here we are on the homestretch now, for we are in sight of the ranch, so I wish to tell you that I have in the pouches a large sum of money some fool sent through by Pony Express."

"I hope I will get it through as safely as you have done, Wild Bill."

"There are special instructions that go with it in a letter to the captain, so you will know them."

In a few minutes more they were nearing the post, and they could see that the crowd gathered there were wild over the return of Buffalo Bill and his pard, while it was evident that they realized something of what had happened.

"Just one hour behind, captain, but I could not well help it, sir," said Wild Bill, as he leaped from his horse and handed the pouches over to Captain Starbuck along with a letter he had brought for him.

"I can well understand your delay, Wild Bill, from what I see before me."

"A dead man, a prisoner, a pack-animal and two saddle-horses, well worth an hour's delay I should say."

"Yes, sir, I thought so."

"Cloven Hoofs, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"But have you ever seen the prisoner before?" asked Wild Bill, in a low voice, which only the agent heard.

Captain Starbuck glanced into the face of the prisoner and then said slowly:

"Yes, I have seen him before, and though he has changed much since then I cannot be mistaken in the man."

"Who do you think he is?"

"Ho, Sergeant Kit Kirby, look this way!" suddenly called out the agent.

The prisoner uttered a cry, turned quickly toward the agent, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Did I not tell you Captain Starbuck would know him?"

"Yes, I know him well, and he is now known as the Red Danite, or Red Hand, the Danite Captain."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PHANTOM PHIL BEARS A MESSAGE TO WILD BILL.

THE double recognition of Kit Kirby by Buffalo Bill and Captain Starbuck convinced Wild Bill that there was no mistake, that he was Red Hand the Danite, whose deeds of crime and cruelty had gained for him the unenviable name.

Looking well at him Wild Bill could well understand that at one time he had been a gentleman, for it was said that he came of an old New York family, inherited a fortune at twenty-one and had been known as a beau whom designing mothers sought to catch for their daughters.

Handsome, well-formed, and sent abroad to be educated, he had killed a fellow student in a duel at Heidelberg University and then began to wander about foreign lands until called home to take his large inheritance.

Within three years his fast horses, yachts, palatial quarters and score of sycophants whom he had imported had squandered his fortune, and finding himself ruined he had gone West and entered the army as a private soldier.

There his career had been a bad one, until at last, taking the life of an officer he had deserted and fled to the Mormons.

Adopting the creed of Brigham Young he had become an officer in the Legion, and from that day his nature seemed to partake of the fiend, for his red deeds made the Mormons outlaw him.

Next a renegade chief among the Indians, leading them to massacre his own people, then an outlaw of the Cloven Hoof band, in which he had been made an officer, Kit Kirby's career had come at last to be captured by Wild Bill, when he and a fellow outlaw were plotting to turn traitor to their comrades, rob the Pony Rider of the large

sum of money he carried, and then seek other scenes to enjoy it.

"There is no doubt, captain," said Wild Bill, when the agent gave him a short sketch of his prisoner's career, "but that he would have killed his comrade and taken the whole treasure for himself, had they been successful in bringing me down."

"It is just what he would have done."

"Now I will not try him for a couple of days, Wild Bill, for I want Buffalo Bill here as a witness, as he knows Kirby."

"You must therefore write your testimony out in full so we can have it, for that will hang him, while the recognition of Cody and myself will clinch matters for his other crimes and get you the rewards for him, as there are several offered."

"If you get the money, captain, put it in the fund for the sick and disabled Pony Riders," said Wild Bill.

The two were in the captain's office discussing the capture, shortly after Buffalo Bill had ridden away on his run to Valley Farm.

The prisoner had been turned over to the Pony Rider who was keeper of the lock-up, and had been carried there and a guard placed over him.

"I sincerely hope that Buffalo Bill will have no trouble in getting through, for that is a large sum he is carrying."

"I was almost tempted to send a guard along."

"Bill wouldn't have liked that, sir, as the pouches had come safely through to him."

"But then his run, as you know, is the hardest ride and the most dangerous one by far."

"We all know that, sir, as we also know that Buffalo Bill volunteered for it when others refused to go, and he is the one to make it."

"He'll go through all right, never fear."

"As you did, Wild Bill."

"But then comes the run of Pony Bob."

"He's another one who will make it, sir."

"I never feel any fear of Buffalo Bill, Pony Bob or myself."

"Nor do I, Wild Bill."

"There are other men on the trail just as good, only they do not seem to all put heart and soul into it as we do."

"Or will take such chances, and when in desperate danger know as well how to extricate themselves."

"Why I think your saving your life as you did, and bringing in your foes, was a deed seldom equaled in cleverness and daring, and I shall report it."

"If any of the boys wish to know who are my champion riders, they have only got to know that you three pards wear more life and service medals than all the rest of the men in my division."

"But what do you think of Stock-Tender Gentleman George's daughter saving Cody as she did?"

"Buffalo Bill told me about it, sir, and I think she should have a life medal from the company also."

"Can you tell how she knows so much about the movements of the outlaws?"

"No, sir, that is her secret; but she seems well posted, and has to work to find it all out, you may be sure," and Wild Bill soon after went over to his quarters and found Little Lone Star and Phantom Phil there awaiting him, the former saying:

"I came over to see you, Pard Bill, and as Jockey Jack has sent you a message by Phantom Phil here, I concluded to wait and see if I could help you out, as your two side pards, Buffalo Bill and Pony Bob are not on hand to see fair play."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

THE face of Wild Bill, always wearing a cynical smile, did not change in the slightest at the words of Little Lone Star.

Of course there could be but one interpretation of what Little Lone Star had said, that Phantom Phil bore a hostile message from Jockey Jack.

"Sit down, pards, and let us see what it is all about," said Wild Bill quietly.

The two sat down upon the camp-made stools and Wild Bill continued.

"You wanted to have a talk with me, you say, Lone Star?"

"Don't mind me, for it's Phantom Phil that has the call on you."

"I'm on hand only to see if you need me to serve you."

"What is it, Pard Phil?" and Wild Bill smiled pleasantly as he turned to the other Pony Rider.

"I'm here from Jockey Jack, Wild Bill."

"Well, what does he want?"

"He wants to call you down."

"Why did he not come and do it then?"

"Well, he wants it all done reg'lar like and in a business way."

"Wants what done?"

"Satisfaction."

"I am satisfied."

"Well he hain't."

"He is hard to satisfy, for he insulted my pard and I downed him for it."

"He was in luck that I did not kill him, as I had a right to do, for he drew a weapon on me, a thing I allow no man to do."

"Come, what does Jockey Jack want, for I'm the most obliging man in the world, and will satisfy him, yes and all who wish to take up his quarrel after he is satisfied."

"I hope I make myself understood, Pard Phantom Phil?"

Wild Bill spoke calmly, but it was plain that he did not like being crowded into an encounter with one whom he had treated most fairly.

Jockey Jack had said that which he had resented, and then had tried to use a weapon and been disarmed, when he would have been killed by almost any one else.

Now he sought to get satisfaction and it made Wild Bill angry, as he thought he saw a trap to get him into a fight with Rocket Rob and his pards, and hence his words that he was ready to meet all who took up the quarrel of Jockey Jack.

In answer to Wild Bill's words Phantom Phil replied:

"Oh, yes, Wild Bill, I understand that you think we, Jack's immediate pards, want to down you."

"But you are off, for this is Jockey Jack's quarrel alone, and my advice to him was to let matters rest as they were, for he had given the insult and you had squared it."

"There are enough of our band of Pony Riders dropping off from outside foes, without having us fight among ourselves."

"Good reasoning surely, Pard Phil; but Jockey Jack won't see it in that way it seems, and I am sorry, for I don't wish trouble even with my foes. I never draw on an Indian or an outlaw, simply to kill, and I certainly do not care to shoot one who is a comrade."

"I wish Jockey Jack would look at it as I do."

"He won't, for there are others that think as he does."

"How does he think?"

"That you should give him a chance to meet you."

"If I refuse?"

"Wild Bill, you are no coward."

"I don't know of any man now above ground that ever told me I was," came the calm response.

"Well, you know men could say so if you refused to meet Jack."

"I see that the Rocket Rob clique are set upon a meeting between Jockey Jack and myself, so I won't disappoint you all."

"What do you wish?"

"Jockey Jack challenges you to meet him with revolvers at twenty paces, walking toward each other at the word and firing as you advance."

"See here, Phantom Phil, are you as great a fool as Jockey Jack, to bring a challenge to a man and arrange all the preliminaries yourself?"

"Little Lone Star comes from a part of the country where dueling goes all the time, so ask him if the challenged party has not the right to select weapons, place, time and distance?"

"Yes, that is the law of the Dueling Code, Phil," said Lone Star.

"Very well, you make your terms, so you meet him, for Jack is not going to be backed down or whipped."

"And you bet the last dollar you can beg, borrow or steal, that Wild Bill won't back

down, Phantom Phil," said Lone Star hotly, while Wild Bill only smiled and said:

"Arrange a meeting, Lone Star."

"This is my time to eat and then sleep, but, if Jockey Jack is so anxious, I'll put off my nap and meet him within half an hour."

"If he prefers later, say when I wake up for supper, or early in the morning."

"As for the place, let us have it up the valley, then, in the Pony Riders' graveyard, where it will be convenient for the one who falls, and the surroundings will be appropriate, for, though Captain Starbuck would not interfere, it is best to clear him of all blame by not telling him now about it."

"And weapons?" asked Little Lone Star.

"Revolvers; but, instead of advancing and firing, one shot will be enough for me, so I shall need but one bullet in my weapon."

"And distance?"

"Ten, fifteen or twenty paces, as you and Phantom Phil may agree, for it is a matter of utter indifference to me."

Lone Star and Phantom Phil then talked together awhile, and it was decided that the duel should be fought at sunset up the valley in the Pony Riders' burying-ground, the distance to be fifteen paces, weapons revolvers, and but one load in each weapon, while the two seconds should toss up for the word to fire when they got upon the field.

This being settled, Wild Bill ate a hearty dinner and then lay down to sleep, almost instantly dropping into a deep slumber, wholly unmindful of the shadow of death hovering over him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE PONY RIDERS' DUEL.

THE sun was a little over half an hour high when Little Lone Star, Happy Harper and Devil Dan went over to Wild Bill's cabin for him.

He was still fast asleep, but Black Diamond, Buffalo Bill's negro servant, had a good supper ready and Wild Bill was awakened and said:

"Have some supper with me, boys?"

"No, Bill, we have had supper, but my pards came with me in case Rocket Rob's men should not feel wholly satisfied and wish to make more trouble."

"Your pards, Buffalo Bill and Pony Bob, are not here to back you up, but we three will stand by you."

"You are very kind, all of you; but I hope there will be no trouble, as Jockey Jack will doubtless be satisfied."

"If you can get the duel declared off, and shake hands all round, I'm more than willing, Lone Star; but if they won't, then I guess I'll be ready when called."

"You bet you will, and we'll be ready, too," said Devil Dan.

Wild Bill ate with a decided relish.

Not a shadow was upon his face, whatever emotion was filling his heart.

When he had finished his supper, they mounted their horses, for Black Diamond had saddled Wild Bill's animal, and the four rode away together.

"I'm coming to see yer kill him, Massa Bill," called out Black Diamond, and he ran to catch a pony and follow them.

Black Diamond was a character in his way, afraid of nothing on earth save "ghosts."

He was an intelligent negro from the South, who had been serving a young lieutenant of cavalry who was killed by the Indians, and whose fate he would have shared had not Buffalo Bill rescued him.

From that day he became the devoted friend and servant of Buffalo Bill, going with him everywhere, and in the Pony Riders' camp he looked after the quarters of Cody, Wild Bill and Pony Bob, though the latter now was on another run.

There were quite a number of men going to the scene of the duel, which showed that it had become known.

Some were on foot, but most all were mounted, and there were Pony Riders, stablemen, herders and settlers.

Rocket Rob and his three comrades were there, Jockey Jack being the one most observed.

He was smoking his pipe, and had been for some little time showing his skill with a revolver cutting wild flowers to pieces.

That he was the dearest of dead shots all knew, and his comrades wore a most confident air, in fact were decidedly aggressive in their way of talking and acting.

The spot chosen for the duel was a truly beautiful one.

It was at the head of a little vale, overhung by high cliffs covered with vines, and shaded by a few large fine old pine trees, through the branches of which the wind sighed an ever mournful requiem for the dead that lay beneath, for over a score of brave Pony Riders lay buried there, and not one of whom had died a natural death.

As Wild Bill came up with his pards the crowd greeted him in a way that had been extended to Jockey Jack, though of course when he had arrived there had not been near as many gathered there.

Jockey Jack stopped his practice of shooting at wild flowers and turned toward Phantom Phil, while Lone Star, throwing his rein to one of his pards said:

"Pards, I don't think any man will say that Wild Bill is afraid to meet Jockey Jack, and if he does, why I'll give him the lie flatfooted and take the consequences."

"But Wild Bill don't want trouble with his pards, there is enough killing to do outside of our camp and band, and we Pony Riders take too many chances as it is, without having to shoot at each other, so I say let us make up this quarrel between two of the best men that ride our trail."

A cheer greeted Little Lone Star's words.

Few men would have been bold enough to have uttered them, but all knew the man that did so.

The cheer showed that the crowd thought as Lone Star did, with few exceptions.

Those few were Rocket Rob's party, and about a dozen men backed them up.

When Little Lone Star had ceased speaking Jockey Jack said with a sneer:

"Of course there will be peace as Wild Bill is afraid to fight."

The Rocket Rob party cheered these words, and all eyes were turned upon Wild Bill.

His face was as placid as ever, but it could be seen that having done his best to prevent a duel, he was now ready to meet the issue.

Without a word he stepped to the place that Lone Star indicated, and Jockey Jack went to his position, a triumphant smile upon his face that was malignant also.

The toss up for the word was won by Phantom Phil, and Jockey Jack took this as a good omen.

In fact he seemed to feel an abiding confidence in himself.

Then, as the sun touched the mountain horizon miles away, Phantom Phil gave the word as agreed upon:

"Are you ready?"

Both men nodded, while Jockey Jack half turned his head and answered:

"Yes, Phil."

It had been arranged that the men should stand with folded arms, their revolvers in their belts, and, at the word, draw and fire.

Having had the answers that both were ready Phantom Phil, after a hesitation that seemed an age, called out quick and sharp:

"Fire!"

There was but one report, for the man who fired that had sent a bullet into the very center of the other's forehead before he had gotten his revolver to a level.

Quick as he was, and dead shot too, Jockey Jack had met a quicker man on the draw and as dead a shot in Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PONY RIDERS' CONFESSION.

WHEN the crack of Wild Bill's revolver was followed by the quick fall of Jockey Jack, Rocket Rob, Phantom Phil and Darling Dick involuntarily dropped their hands upon their weapons.

But instantly Little Lone Star called out: "None of that, Rocket Rob, or you and your pards will rue it."

"Do I say right, men?"

The roar of voices answering in the affirmative convinced Rocket Rob that he was making a mistake, and he said quickly:

"I didn't do anything but prepare to protect myself, for I supposed Wild Bill had it in for me too."

Wild Bill made no reply to this, but simply smiled, while Lone Star said:

"Wild Bill didn't want to fight a comrade, and I told you all so."

"But, Jockey Jack wanted war, and he got it, fair and square, for he wasn't quick enough."

"I guess there is no man here who will assert that the duel was not wholly fair?" said Wild Bill in his quiet way, and his piercing eyes swept over the crowd, seeming to rest upon each one.

Not a voice answered, and Wild Bill turned away, with a sad look toward the body of Jockey Jack.

The three close comrades of the dead man had been convinced that they had not better seek further trouble, and so they dropped the matter and went and bent over their fallen comrade.

"Poor Jack!"

"One minute ago in perfect health and as chipper as a bird, but now dead and gone from his forever."

Wild Bill heard his words, but his face remained immovable, as it did also at the praise of his daddy aim some were bestowing upon him.

"Right square between the eyes," said one.

"The best shot I ever seen."

"He is quicker than greased lightning on the draw and pull trigger."

"He had his gun out and leveled before Jack got his from his belt."

"Jack made a mistake to look toward Phantom Phil when he got the word."

"He made a mistake to force a fight with Wild Bill."

So the comments ran around the crowd, while Wild Bill and Lone Star walked over to their horses to mount and ride away.

"Here's your horse, Massa Wild Bill."

"I seen it, sah, and it was mighty quick work."

"I'd hate to have you shoot at me, sah," said Black Diamond, admiringly.

"You'd never know it if he did, Diamond," Lone Star said.

"That's so, sah."

"But I thought you was going to have more trouble, and I had my gun ready."

"And would use it well, too, Diamond; but no, the storm did not break," Wild Bill responded, and as he mounted and rode on he continued:

"Now, Lone Star, do you wish to go with me and place me under another deep obligation?"

"Certainly, pard."

"Where are you going?"

"To report to Captain Starbuck and take my medicine, whatever it is."

"I'm with you, Pard Bill."

"I know that, Lone Star, for you showed your friendship well to-day."

"I am sorry that poor Jockey Jack forced me to kill him, for I tell you, old pard, this taking human life is a bitter weight to carry, and I have more than had my share of it, as has Buffalo Bill also; but neither of us ever pulled trigger on a man without just cause."

"I can believe that, Wild Bill."

"Jockey Jack intended to kill me I saw."

"He and his pards talked it over and they had confidence in his ability to do it, for surely had he not thought so he never would have forced that fight upon me."

"Yes, and they were as much amazed as could be that you got in the shot first, and didn't care to press the matter further."

"But now to see Captain Starbuck."

They dismounted at the door of headquarters in the gathering twilight and the captain met them with the remark:

"Anything wrong, Wild Bill, that you and Lone Star are mounted?"

"That is just it, captain, for there is something wrong."

"Out with it then."

"I just killed Jockey Jack, sir."

"Ah! in a quarrel in camp?"

"You saw the quarrel, sir, all there was of it, when Buffalo Bill came in with the body of Fearless Frank."

"Yes."

"Jockey Jack pressed the matter, sent Phantom Phil to me with a challenge, and we met half an hour ago in the little burying ground."

"Who was there?"

"It is easier to tell you who was not, sir, for every one except you."

"It was a regular duel, captain, according to the Texas code."

"I seconded Bill here, and more, in his name offered on the field to call it off and make friends."

"But Jockey Jack was so dead sure he could kill Bill he wouldn't have it."

"He said Bill was backing down from fear of him and of course that settled it, the duel was fought, Phantom Phil gave the word, and I never saw anything so quick as Wild Bill's draw and fire, and his bullet landed right between Jack's eyes, so we are here to report it, sir."

"As it was a duel I can say nothing, though I regret that the affair occurred, but you were not to blame, Wild Bill, I am sure," and Captain Starbuck extended his hand to Wild Bill and then to Lone Star, both of whom felt relieved by his generous action, for he could have discharged them from the company.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE SEARCH PATROL.

THERE was a certain feeling of gloom resting upon the camp of the Pony Riders that night, after the killing of Jockey Jack.

The latter was borne to his cabin by his pards, who, for the second time in three days had to mourn the loss of one of their little family.

From a quintette their number had come down to a trio.

With the death of Fearless Frank it was different, as far as the Pony Riders generally were concerned, for they had looked upon him as a traitor to their band.

They considered themselves above such a deed as he was thought guilty of, in an attempt, not only to kill a comrade, but to rob the company.

Hardly a man was there who believed that Fearless Frank's pards were in the deal with him, or they would have been very quickly dealt with.

Whatever had been the career of the Pony Riders, as far as leading wild and reckless lives, they were men of the highest honor, to be trusted under any and all circumstances, scornful to do a mean act.

Personal encounters they might have had often, they had been poor, and had roamed about from mining-camp to settlement and fort, but they were not intentionally bad men, and they had been picked for the work they were doing wholly on account of their worth and because they possessed the qualities requisite for just the hard and dangerous services devolving upon them.

When the Pony Riders, then, kept away from Rocket Rob's cabin with Fearless Frank lying dead in it, because they believed him guilty, they showed their sympathy at once when Jockey Jack was borne there a corpse.

They all felt that Jack had brought his death upon himself, but that was his affair and he had been the sufferer, and they would not go against him and his friends when dead.

So they dropped into the cabin in twos and threes, expressed their sympathy and offered their services as watchers.

But their offers were declined, Rocket Rob remarking:

"No, thank you, pards, we have laid him out, as you see, in his best, and we'll spread a blanket over him at bedtime, and then turn in ourselves."

"We've slept with him there so often when he was alive, I guess we won't mind it now he's dead."

So after the stream of Pony Riders had ceased, all having taken a look at their dead comrade, Rocket Rob and his pards drew a blanket over the silent form, closed the door and sat down for a talk.

"Pards, it was all square," returned Phantom Phil, who was a little anxious to know if his companions thought he had acquitted himself well as second for Jockey Jack.

"Square!"

"And I guess it was as square as any fight would be with that man, as square as it would be with Buffalo Bill too," said Rocket Rob.

"I don't understand, Pard Rob," said Phantom Phil.

"Nor me," added Daring Dick.

"Why, no fight would be square, I mean, that a man fought with Wild Bill or Buffalo Bill, yes, and with Pony Rob."

"We all think ourselves men here, and I guess we are and above the average, but the man who faces those three I have named in a funeral encounter makes the mistake of his life."

"Yes, it was square enough as men go, but not when Wild Bill was the man poor Jack meant to kill."

"Why I was as sure Jack would kill him as I am that I am here this minute."

"So was I," said Daring Dick.

"Me too," echoed Phantom Phil.

"Well, Fearless Frank went, you know how, and by Buffalo Bill's hand, and now Jockey Jack is gone, and by Wild Bill's hand."

"Must we give up our plan of running those three men down?" and Rocket Rob asked the question in a low tone.

"No, there are three of them and three of us."

"If we can't match them one way we can another."

"Yes, but we must go mighty slow."

"You bet we must."

"Well, pards, as we are of the same way of thinking we can do it."

"Now let us turn in, for we have got to bury Jack in the morning and you know Buffalo Bill is to come in and Wild Bill to go out."

With this last remark of Rocket Rob the trio turned in for the night, their dead pard lying in his last sleep on his cot.

The next morning all the camp turned out to the funeral of Jockey Jack save Wild Bill and Little Lone Star, who remained in the former's cabin.

Captain Starbuck read the burial service and a quartette among the Pony Riders of fine voices sung several hymns in a way that brought tears to many eyes.

Then one and all adjourned to the post to see Buffalo Bill come in and Wild Bill start out.

Wild Bill soon appeared all ready for his hard and perilous ride.

He had the same calm face and cynical smile, and spoke pleasantly to those who came up and had a word with him.

As the time came for Buffalo Bill to arrive and he did not appear in sight, Wild Bill's handsome face grew clouded, and when minute after minute went by and he did not come in sight, he said:

"Captain Starbuck, Cody is an on-time man, sir, and he is now thirty minutes late, so I would like to go in search of him, sir."

"Do so, but take a patrol with you, Wild Bill."

"Four of us will do, sir."

"Yes, if you think so."

"I do, sir."

"I would like Lone Star and his two pards to accompany me, sir."

"All right."

"And me too, Massa Wild Bill," called out Black Diamond running up, his face most anxious looking at the fear of harm to Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, Diamond, you can go along also," said Wild Bill, and five minutes after the party of five rode away from the ranch to investigate the reason that Buffalo Bill should be over half an hour behind time.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MISSING MAN.

WHEN Buffalo Bill rode away from the post, he fully realized that he carried the most valuable package he had ever had in his charge, and under circumstances the most dangerous.

The Red Danite had admitted in a way that the King of the Cloven Hoofs, as the chief of the outlaw band was called, had told him that his spies had reported a valuable package of money coming through, and the band were determined to get it.

He had been left in camp, as he was complaining of being ill, and so had determined to get the money himself, with a man to aid him, and who, he significantly remarked, "would have met with some accident before going far."

With this information that the Cloven

Hoofs would surely be on the watch for him Buffalo Bill rode away from the ranch.

He could not believe it possible that his fair Girl Guide would again be on hand to warn him.

But he was not a man to hesitate in the discharge of his duty, and so on he rode.

Arriving at the spot where he had had the fatal encounter with Fearless Frank he did not even draw rein.

Red Devil would have turned off at the secret trail, remembering the fine pasturage in the little canyon-basin, but the Pony Rider kept him steadily on for Wolf Den Pass.

It is needless to say that he did not look for the well-remembered signal of danger in the trail, the stick with the warning note stuck in it.

But the pass came in sight and no warning had he seen.

He nerved himself for what was before him, settled himself in his saddle and with a revolver cocked in each hand dashed into the pass which had been such a fatal spot to the Pony Riders.

But he saw no one, and there was no sound of a voice calling to him to halt.

On he swept, much relieved in mind, for the Wolf Den Pass had been the spot most dreaded.

The first relay was reached, but he did not change horses there, always giving Devil Dan the double run as he was well able to stand it.

Then Silent Sam's station was the next, and he was within five miles of it, his horse running free, when suddenly his eyes fell upon the looked for signal ahead.

He swooped over in his saddle and drew up the stick, taking out the slip of paper from the slit in the top.

Halting a moment he read:

"The danger to Buffalo Bill this time lies at the brook a mile this side of Silent Sam's corral.

"When he halts at the brook to water his horse, he will be fired upon without challenge, from the top of Table Rock on the left of the trail, and not fifty feet from him.

"He can flank the danger by turning a mile from this point and following the deer trail to the left, and coming out just the other side of Silent Sam's cabin.

"A FRIEND IN CAMP.

"P. S.—I have just learned that there will be another ambush of three men four miles this side of Valley Farm station, where the trail runs through a canyon, just at a thick growth of pines.

"To avoid this you will have to ride around a distance of ten miles, as you doubtless know, but it is better than taking the chances of being killed from ambush."

Buffalo Bill meditated a moment before going on, and then glanced at his watch.

"I am glad I rode so fast, for I am twenty-two minutes ahead of time to this point, so can make the flank ride and not lose much.

"Come, Red Devil, do your level best."

Away bounded the horse and reaching the deer trail Buffalo Bill swung into it without hesitating an instant, for he had made that ride several times before when doing patrol duty over the line.

He kept up the same fast gait as before, Red Devil looking well to his footing and going over rocks and rugged places like a deer.

When he knew he was coming near to the trail he slackened his pace as he did not wish the sound of hoofs to reach the ears of Silent Sam.

Wheeling into the trail he turned back to ride to Silent Sam's station some few hundred yards away.

As he turned the bend he caught sight of Silent Sam.

But he was not alone. Another was with him, and he stood in the middle of the trail, their backs toward him, and seemed to be listening for his coming in the other direction, though it was a quarter of an hour before he was due at the station.

Quickly he wheeled his horse and rode back around the bend a short distance.

Then turning he put his horse in a rapid run for the station.

His horse's hoof-falls rattled loudly now, and as he came in sight of the station he saw only Silent Sam there, and he was regarding

him with a look of surprise as though wondering if his eyes deceived him.

Dashing up Buffalo Bill slipped from his saddle on the other side of his horse, and had his revolver ready for quick use, while he said:

"Quick, Silent Sam, and I want to push on; but as I am a little ahead this run I'll not report you for not having my horse ready for me."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AVOIDING A TRAP.

SILENT SAM looked surprised, and said:

"How did you come that way?"

"I simply made a flank movement, Silent Sam, for in these days so fatal to Pony Riders, I am over careful you know, not to ride in to ambush."

"Don't think there's any danger now."

"You don't?"

"Well, I do, and that makes another marked difference between us."

"Maybe so."

"Well, you walk in and get a bite, or a little tanglefoot, for I have some."

"Your invitation I thank you for, Silent Sam, but I am not hungry just now, for food at least, and I've joined the Water Tanks, so fairly shiver when I see liquor."

"Have you seen any one around lately?"

"No; but you better have suthin', for it's all ready."

"So am I to start, so fetch out my mount."

Silent Sam walked doggedly away, the eyes of the Pony Rider watching him like a hawk.

Had he attempted to have entered his cabin Silent Sam would have gotten into trouble then and there with Buffalo Bill.

But the cabin door was closed, and Buffalo Bill was watching it.

Nowhere was the man he had seen visible, and Silent Sam had made no mention of his presence.

As he came back leading the horse Silent Sam started toward the cabin, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"Come, Sam, no delay, bring that horse here at once."

"I'm going to get another bridle."

"That one will do."

"Don't anger me, Sam, by your delaying me."

With a muttered oath the man halted with the horse near the cabin door, and quick as a flash Buffalo Bill covered him with his revolver and cried:

"If you do not obey me I'll make you feel that I won't be trifled with."

"Come, and come a-running!"

Silent Sam obeyed to the letter, for he said something Buffalo Bill did not hear and came rapidly forward with the horse.

"See here, Silent Sam, you seem anxious to make me lose my place by delaying me, and I'll tell you flat-footed, if you don't mend your ways I'll report you and Captain Starbuck will bounce you."

"Just because I offered you something to eat, and a drink."

"No; I thank you for you offered hospitality, but I cannot delay, and you put me back more than all the rest of the relay men on the trail."

"There, I am ready now; but, tell me, do you think there is danger ahead for me?"

"No, I hain't seen a man since I seen you last, not one having gone by."

"All right, I'll take my chances."

"Don't report me, Bill, for I'm a poor man and didn't mean to delay yer."

"All right," and with a bound Buffalo Bill was in his saddle.

But he reined the impatient horse back and went off slowly, looking behind him and calling out to Silent Sam:

"I say, Sam, Wild Bill got two Cloven Hoofs on this run through, and I may have to pull trigger on some one yet before I get back to Headquarters Post."

"Where did he kill 'em, Buffalo Bill?" called out Silent Sam, with marked interest.

But Buffalo Bill was now out of revolver range of the cabin, and no longer cared to keep his eye on Silent Sam, so he let his horse bound ahead at a full run.

"Well, what I saw carries out my suspicions against that man, and which I have had for some time.

"I just hinted my suspicion that Silent Sam was crooked to Captain Starbuck, for I did not wish to accuse a man without proof of guilt."

"I think I have full proof now, and he is surely in with the Cloven Hoofs."

"He and that fellow with him were standing in the trail when I saw them, waiting to hear the rifles go off that ended my life, for they could easily hear them there from the ambush at the brook."

"My plan worked well, to let them hear hoof-falls, and see if the other man would not go into hiding."

"Well, he went, and Silent Sam's hospitality meant that I should enter the cabin and be killed, but I wasn't quite fool enough to please him."

"When he halted the horse at the cabin door, it was for me to go there and let his pard shoot me in the back."

"But, I was a few chips shy on that, too, and in riding away I knew better than to take my eye off of him."

"He is too big a coward to pull on me himself, but he arranged for the other to do it."

"Well, Silent Sam, if I live to get back this far on the run to the ranch, I'll take company with me from your station, or I am very much mistaken."

So mused Buffalo Bill as he rode on his way, feeling much elated at having flanked the ambush at the Table Rock, then circumvented his foes at the station and gotten thus far on his way toward the other danger he had been warned against.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A DEADLY GANTLET TO RUN.

WHEN Buffalo Bill came to the place where he should turn off, if he wished to heed the postscript warning of his fair rescuer, he drew rein and sat motionless in his saddle and mused for awhile, the moonlight falling full upon him.

"Three men, the warning said, and at the pine thicket in the canyon four miles this side of Valley Farm."

"I know the place well, and the pines are so thick it is the very place for an ambush."

"But they are only on one side of the trail, a cliff on the other, and if the men are in the pines they are toward the other end of the thicket."

"They would not see me until I turned the cliff; but they would hear my horse's hoofs in that canyon half a mile before I got there."

"The streams are so high now, from the melting snows on the mountains, I could not cross the river where my fair preserver indicates, by a ten mile ride around, but would have to go perhaps thirty miles out of my way, so I guess I'll try strategy and risk it at the pines."

Having so decided Buffalo Bill started ahead again in a run.

Looking at his watch by the moonlight he saw that he was all of twenty minutes ahead of his time.

It was a beautiful night, the skies being cloudless and the moon lighted his way.

Swiftly he sped along until he drew within a mile of the canyon ambush.

Then he drew down to a walk, and instead of flying through the rocky canyon, sending the echoes of his horse's hoof-falls rattling far and wide, he rode at a very slow pace, picking his way most cautiously.

As he reached the bend in the canyon, he halted, dismounted, hitched his horse to a pine and peered cautiously around the cliff.

His ears were as alert as a fox's, and listening he heard a laugh not a hundred yards away, and then the words:

"Keep still there, you fellers, for I can't hear the sound of his coming if you make such a racket."

"Why it hain't time yet, pard, so come and get another nip afore he comes along, for we'll need a little to sustain us, for mind you, if the King didn't catch him at Sable Rock, we've got to do it, and it's Buffalo Bill remember we has to tackle."

This voice came from the pines, not two hundred feet from Buffalo Bill, and, as though to accept the invitation offered, a man stepped out from the shadow of the cliff and walked across the trail in the full glare of the moonlight.

In an instant Buffalo Bill had leaped into his saddle, and with a revolver in each hand rode around the bend in the canyon.

He kept close in under the shadow of the cliff for a hundred feet, and just then saw the form of the guard returning to his post, he having gotten his drink.

In an instant Buffalo Bill covered him and pulled trigger.

The man uttered a cry of pain and fright commingled and staggered backward falling heavily, while Buffalo Bill with his wild and terrible war-cry sprung forward, both revolvers rattling forth and aimed into the pines about where he supposed the other outlaws were seated.

Over the form of the fallen man his horse bounded, and away like an arrow he flew, the revolvers of Buffalo Bill flashing into the pines as he rode by.

Not until he was a hundred feet beyond the fallen outlaw did an answering shot come and the Pony Rider answered it with a yell, as the bullet whizzed by his head.

Then he suddenly drew rein, and wheeling quickly to the right rode off the trail.

His quick eye caught sight of three horses hitched not far away and plainly visible in the moonlight.

To catch rein after rein and cut them loose, and then start the three horses ahead of him in a run was the work of an instant, and he uttered a shout of triumph as he regained the trail with his prizes and kept them at full speed on toward Valley Farm.

His bold act had been seen too late to prevent, but as he sped along a rifle sent bullets flying after him, one striking his own horse in the hip.

On the Pony Rider flew, his captured horses dashing on ahead, like animals accustomed to being driven in droves.

The moonlight revealed the face of Buffalo Bill, stern, determined, defiant and triumphant, for he felt that he had added another bold deed to his many daring achievements.

He did not let the horses slacken their speed until they drew near Valley Farm, and then he said:

"I must go slow, or Gentleman George, Little Sunbeam and those savage dogs will all be upon me, thinking I am the whole Cloven Hoof outfit."

Ten minutes after at a slow pace he rode up to the stockade and heard the stern challenge:

"Who are you?"

"Buffalo Bill, Gentleman George, and three outlaws' horses I captured back in the canyon four miles from here."

"Can you mount and return with me, for I brought down one of their riders, and we may capture the others, too."

"I will go at once—shall I bring my dogs?"

"No, they would tear them to pieces, and I don't want that."

"I am on time, am I not?"

"Yes, with two minutes to spare," was the answer of Gentleman George, and calling to his daughter to look out for the cabin, and bring a rifle out to Buffalo Bill, he mounted one of the outlaws' horses.

Buffalo Bill gave the pouches over to Little Sunbeam, and then, with Gentleman George by his side rode back on the trail, he having changed from his wounded horse to one of those he had captured, and which, as has been said, were already saddled and bridled.

CHAPTER XLV.

BEHIND TIME.

GENTLEMAN GEORGE the stock-tender accompanied Buffalo Bill back to the scene of his running the gantlet with the hope that they might capture the two outlaws as they were not mounted.

"The one I fired on we will find there I know, for if they have fled they cannot take him along, dismounted as they are," said the Pony Rider.

As they rode along Buffalo Bill arranged that he should dismount and advance on foot, some distance ahead of Gentleman George, who would follow with the horses.

Arriving within a short distance of the canyon, after a rapid ride, Buffalo Bill armed with the rifle Little Sunbeam had brought out to him, went ahead.

He came in sight of the pine thicket, and

getting out of the moonlight, in the shadow of the cliff he advanced cautiously.

He soon came in sight of a dark form lying on the ground.

"They have fled and left their dead comrade unburied," he said.

A close search of the thicket where Gentleman George came up, showed that the two men were gone, and they had departed in such haste that they had left their blankets on the ground where they had been seated.

On the blanket was a rifle, and there was upon it stains of blood.

"See here, Mr. Cody, one of your random shots at the other two wounded one of them surely."

"It looks so, and that explains why only one fired at me."

"Now to this dead man."

"We will carry him back with us, and I will bury him to-morrow."

"Yes, they left him unburied but I cannot do that."

"They robbed him too, or rather took from him all that he had valuable, for his pockets are turned inside out."

"But they left his rifle and belt-of-arms, see!" and Buffalo Bill pointed to a rifle that lay upon the ground near the body, and also a belt of arms.

"I guess the man who was not hurt had all he could look after with his wounded comrade and his own weapons," answered Gentleman George, and he added:

"Your bullet was well aimed, for it struck him in the head."

"Now we will strap him upon his saddle," and the body was lifted to the back of the third horse which they had brought with them.

"Feeling that it was useless to look for the fugitives by night they started back to the station riding at a swift gallop."

So far Gentleman George had not spoken of the noble and daring part his daughter had played to save Buffalo Bill, and the latter wondered that he had made no mention of it.

He was surprised when Gentleman George asked:

"Have the Cloven Hoofs given any trouble along the trail the last couple of days, Mr. Cody?"

"Have you heard nothing from the eastward since I was last here?"

"Not a word."

"How could I?"

Buffalo Bill made no reply, but the thought flashed through his mind that Lena Ross had not told her father of her going to Headquarters Ranch, and he wondered how she could keep it from him.

So he ventured:

"I didn't know but that Little Sunbeam might have seen some one."

"No, for if she had she would have told me."

"Of late she has not gone out hunting as much as she used to do, on account of the Cloven Hoofs having been seen on the trail."

They had now arrived at the stockade, and there stood Little Sunbeam ready to receive them.

She glanced quickly at the limp form on the saddle, and said in a pathetic way:

"Another corpse?"

"Oh! is it not terrible that to live in this wild land one must kill, kill, kill!"

"Mr. Cody fired in self-defense, my daughter," reproachfully said the stock-tender.

"I well know that, father, for Buffalo Bill is not one to take life without just cause."

"I was only referring to the fact that life here renders it necessary to constantly keep your hand raised against your fellow-man."

"It is true, Miss Lena, and sad that it is so; but, fortunately, we are on the side of justice and self-defense."

"Do not think I meant a reproach to you, Buffalo Bill, for I did not."

"Why, have I not also had to kill in both my own and others' defense?"

"Has not Pony Bob come in yet?" quickly asked the stock-tender, seeming now to miss him for the first time, and realizing that he was overdue.

Buffalo Bill quickly looked at his watch and said:

"Why, I had forgotten Pony Bob; he is forty minutes late."

"So he is—ah! the streams are all high,

and he is doubtless detained at the place where the trail crosses the rapids, and I will go and meet him and bring him over a bridge I only finished to-day across the stream half a mile above where the crossing is."

"Daughter, see that Buffalo Bill gets a good supper, and I will soon be back with Pony Bob."

Buffalo Bill had entered the stockade as he was talking to Lena Ross, while her father had placed the body of the dead outlaw upon the piazza to await burial on the morrow.

As Gentleman George spoke of the crossing, he leaped upon one of the outlaws' horses and rode rapidly away, leaving Buffalo Bill and Little Sunbeam together.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A SURPRISE FOR BUFFALO BILL.

"COME in, Buffalo Bill, and I will soon have your supper ready for you," said Little Sunbeam as her father rode away.

"I would rather wait until Pony Bob comes, Miss Lena, and we will have supper together."

"Just as you please, but I feared you would wish to rush right off, for I know how anxious you always are to be on time to the second."

"Well I guess this time will be an exception, for I will have something to detain me going back."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Not yet, but it would be if I left something undone."

"The fact is, Little Sunbeam, I am sure that one of the stock-tenders is a traitor."

"Then I can name him."

"D, so."

"Silent Sam."

"What reason have you to suspect him?"

"I have no reason other than to have discovered that he has company he never speaks of and they are none of our people either."

"Then if he is not a villain it is a shame that Nature gave him the face of one."

"It is Silent Sam I referred to, Little Sunbeam," answered Buffalo Bill and he went on to tell what he had discovered, and that he intended making Silent Sam a prisoner upon his return and taking him to the ranch with him.

Then Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now, Little Sunbeam, I wish to thank you for your great kindness to me in coming to my rescue as you did."

"How do you mean, Buffalo Bill?"

"Need I explain to you that your testimony got me out of a scrape, for matters were looking bad for me when you came, and you are a brave little woman to make that long night ride as you did."

"Why, Buffalo Bill, I do not know what you mean?"

"Do you mean that you do not want your father to know?"

"Know what?"

"I did not tell him, for from a word or two he said I did not think that he knew, so I did not give you away."

"See here, Buffalo Bill, you don't appear to be drunk, and I do not believe you are delirious with fever; but what you mean by talking as you do I cannot understand."

"Do you mean to say you do not understand why I wish to thank you?"

"I do say so."

"Do you deny having been to Headquarters Ranch?"

"I have not been there in two months."

"Two days, you mean."

"I said two months, and I mean it."

"Then you will deny having been a witness in my favor?"

"I never was, and I do not know to what you allude."

"Upon honor?"

"Yes, upon my honor."

"You deny having warned me of outlaw traps by letters and having been my Girl Guide by a secret trail around Wolf Den Pass?"

"It is all news to me."

"I never wrote you a letter in my life."

"I cannot understand why you deny all this, Miss Lena, but I am one to believe that which my own eyes see."

"Do you mean to say that you ever saw me save here at this station, excepting once

when we met on the trail, when I was hunting, and rode back here with you?"

"I mean to say that I saw you in disguise some days ago, when you guided me by the secret pass I spoke of, and I have received several warning letters from you, staked up in the trail, giving me news that saved my life, while you appeared as a witness in my behalf the other night at Headquarters Ranch."

"But you deny all this?"

"Most certainly I do, though there is nothing that I would not do to save any of the brave Pony Riders from death."

Buffalo Bill shook his head in an incredulous way and Little Sunbeam asked quickly:

"Have you those letters?"

"I have the last one I received with me."

"Let me see it."

He handed her the last warning, and the moment she glanced at it she said:

"Why, this is not my writing, Buffalo Bill."

"Come in and I'll show you my writing, for you cannot see well in the moonlight."

He silently followed her into the cabin, and she handed to him her diary, and said:

"See, that is my writing, and it is wholly different from this letter."

"Yes, but the testimony of my eyes."

"You say that you saw me?"

"Yes."

"At headquarters?"

"Yes."

"Buffalo Bill, I pledge you my word you are mistaken."

"Then you have a double, Little Sunbeam, and I did not believe that possible."

"I a double?" she cried excitedly, and then she stood lost in deep meditation a moment, and broke the silence with:

"Buffalo Bill, you did not see me at the ranch, for I was not there."

"I did not write those warning letters, gladly as I would have warned you if I had known of your danger."

"Some one else has, and I ask you, did she say that she was Lena Ross?"

"No, I recall now that she simply raised her veil and revealed your face, when Captain Starbuck asked her who she was."

"Buffalo Bill, you interest me far more than you can know."

"Sit right there and tell me the whole story of my—my—double," and Lena Ross spoke in a tone of deep feeling.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ON THE TRAIL OF A PARD.

"If the girl is deceiving me she is a finished actress and a very wicked woman to say what she does on honor."

So said Buffalo Bill when he looked at Little Sunbeam and heard her last words, begging him to tell her the story he had claimed she knew all about.

But there was a look away back in the depths of her beautiful eyes that was all innocence and truth, and so he said:

"Little Sunbeam, I am inclined to take your word against my own eyesight."

"Do so, for you will have it proven to you, that I would not lie to you, would not deceive you."

"What motive have I for doing so, and had it been in my power to have served you, and other Pony Riders, would I not have gladly done so?"

"Would I not be too glad to accept the honor, and not to seek to deny it?"

"Then too, how could I have been your mysterious guide and yet be here when you arrive, for I would not have fresh mounts as you Pony Riders have?"

"I thought of all that, and admit I was bewildered, and yet I had the evidence of what I saw, and others saw, and one and all believed that it was you."

"Do you now think so, Buffalo Bill?"

"Frankly no, when I have your word that it was not; yes, and reason too tells me as I view it now that it could not have been you."

"But then who was it?"

"That I am going to ask you to find out for me, for it is more important than you now can imagine."

"But tell me, please the whole story of the warnings, your meeting with her, and

her coming to appear as a witness in your favor."

"Yes, I want to know it all, and you will tell me, will you not, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, I will tell you all, and perhaps we can find out who my Girl Guide is."

Then Buffalo Bill told the whole story from beginning to end, stating that he had kept the warning a secret as he supposed of course that his mysterious guide was in some way connected with the band of Cloven Hoofs and it would get her in trouble if it was known that she had done anything to aid the Pony Riders.

"When, as he supposed, Little Sunbeam appeared as the 'Unknown,' he confessed that he was completely staggered, and Captain Starbuck had wondered how she, the stock-tender's daughter, was so well informed of the movements of the outlaws."

"I tell you, Little Sunbeam, no one save you and I must hold this secret, that it was not you that appeared at the trial that night, for we might save the one who serves me so well a great deal of trouble, as it will surely leak out and get to the ears of the Cloven Hoofs in some way, for see, Fearless Frank intended to play a bold game to benefit himself, and Silent Sam is a traitor, so you see we must be careful who we trust."

"Certainly, and I wish to ask you not to speak to my father of this, at least not for a while, as I wish more material than we now have to work on before I tell him about it."

"I will do as you wish, Miss Lena."

"Thank you, and let me tell you that it means a great deal to my father and myself, yes and others too."

"But is it not strange that Pony Bob has not come in, for it is past the time for you to have started on your return run?"

"Yes, I should have been off ten minutes ago."

"I will get a horse and ride on to see what is the matter."

Several horses were always kept up at the cabin, so in a few minutes Buffalo Bill had saddled an animal and was on his way up the trail.

He rode directly to where it crossed the brook, just at the rapids, and as he reached the ford he saw Gentleman George coming across.

"You have not found him?" he said, anxiously, as the stock-tender reached the shore where he was.

"No, and, as you see, it was not the brook that detained him, for it was not near so high as I thought."

"I crossed on my bridge, a quarter of a mile above, and which spans the stream where it is narrow, running between high cliffs."

"Did you ride far?"

"Several miles."

"And saw no signs of him?"

"None, so I returned to talk with you as to what was best to be done."

"I am going on to the next station, but you return, for your daughter is all alone and you may be needed."

"True, but Lena is pretty well able to take care of herself, and then the cabin is a fort you know, while she has the dogs, too."

"Yes, but I dislike to leave her alone, and I can find out what the trouble is, for I cannot understand the delay, as Pony Bob is an on-time rider, as you know, and pretty well able to take care of himself."

"Yes, indeed, he certainly is; but he is mortal, and a bullet will bring any man down—see there! some one is coming."

They were in the shadow of the trees across the stream, and they both beheld a form come into the moonlight.

He was following the trail, and coming along at a trot.

"Bravo! it is Pony Bob, and he has had trouble for he is afoot," cried Buffalo Bill to Gentleman George, as the two sat on their horses across the stream watching the dismounted Pony Rider's approach.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PONY BOB.

PONY BOB was as cunning as a fox, all of his comrades asserted.

He was small in stature, but wiry and

quick, while he held himself erect with the dignity of a general reviewing his command.

But Pony Bob's dignity was all in appearance outwardly, as he was the greatest imp of mischief in the Pony Riders' League.

He could run like a deer, ride like a Comanche, and mount and dismount at full speed.

His endurance was wonderful, and he was wholly devoid of knowing emotion of fear.

Big chances he always took, and his very boldness was wont to carry him through.

When in his camp he was constantly playing jokes upon his comrades, and his innocent expression caused him to be the last man suspected.

Buffalo Bill was his beau ideal of manhood and Wild Bill was another type of man that he regarded as far above par.

It had been Pony Bob's luck once to do a great service to a Mormon train, and since then he had been most kindly regarded by all of Brigham Young's followers.

Every minute of his life Pony Bob enjoyed.

If he ate a crust of bread he was fully satisfied with it, and if he slept on a bed of leaves he enjoyed it, while when "the very best" fell to his lot it gave him no greater pleasure.

He enjoyed riding along by day and by night on his long and lonely runs, and if danger came he would meet it with a bold front and what his indomitable pluck would not accomplish his cunning and cleverness would.

He had been a target for scores of bullets, but they were wont to pass him by, and when wounded, as he had been several times, they were, as he asserted, "slight affairs, and I needed bleeding as I was living too high—always on top of a horse."

When Pony Bob played a joke his quick departure from the crowd showed that he was fearful of consequences, and no one had ever seen him laugh outright himself, but the old trick was always lurking in his eyes.

Such was the young Pony Rider that Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George had gone out on the search of.

Buffalo Bill had felt perfect confidence in Pony Bob's coming in, if he was alive.

It was the thought that he had been shot from ambush that troubled him.

And Pony Bob?

Why, he had started on time, and with some important papers from San Francisco that a company there had paid the Overland Express Company special rates to have sent through in haste and safely.

He had ridden faster than his wont, so that the papers could get in ahead of regular schedule time, and had passed station after station ahead of time and without a mishap.

As he reached the last station before the one where Gentleman George lived, and which was the end of his eastern run, the stock tender said:

"Bob, there is trouble ahead."

"What's up?"

"I was out hunting this afternoon, and I came upon a camp in the timber under Eagle Rock."

"Close quarters, there?"

"Yes, there is no chance of going through unseen on horseback."

"No, it does look that way, and they are laying for me?"

"Yes, they are Cloven Hoofs."

"How many of them are there?"

"I counted five horses staked out on the little meadow on the creek side of the timber."

"That means five men, or four and a pack-horse, for those outlaws always travel in style."

"Yes, if more than two are along, they carry a pack-horse generally."

"Well, four are a little too rich for my blood, Handy."

"That's what, and if I was you I'd play the sneak act on them."

"How is that?"

"It is to turn your horse loose and send him in this direction, for I'll watch for him, and then slip through on foot, as you can do, and hoof it to the station of Gentleman George."

"It's a hoof dance of nine miles, Handy."

"Yes, but it's a longer trail to the Happy Hunting Grounds, Pony Bob."

"Right you are, pard."

"But, I'll be guided by circumstances when I get there— Say, now I think of it, Handy, lend me an old suit of clothes and a hat that bullets won't injure to any alarming extent, and several sticks and a lariat, too."

"I see your little game, Pony Bob. If anything is to be shot it won't be you."

"Exactly; but, hurry up with the things, for, though I'm ahead well on time, it will take me half an hour to build my dummy, if I have to do so; but, you bet, Handy, I'm going through on this run, for the Pony Express Company can't afford to lose me."

"I never heard any of the company say so, but that is my opinion."

"You are right, Pony Bob, and your life is more valuable than any freight you may carry."

"Remember, it is at Eagle Rock, and the camp was in the timber, the horses in the meadow, and five of them—don't forget."

"Forget? Why, I'm branded with it, Handy—tra-la-la," and Pony Bob was away to face the danger ahead of him.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE PONY RIDER'S RUSE.

PONY BOB went flying along the trail, his mind busy with what was before him.

The moon lighted his way, but whether dashing through heavy timber, under the shadows of the high walls of a canyon, around a mountain spur, or over a range, he kept up the same steady pace.

He was light, he had a good horse and he was going over the ground at a speed that was making minutes in his favor on time of arrival, that is if he did not meet with a delay.

As he neared Eagle Rock he drew his horse down to a gallop, and then to a canter, at last going in a walk.

Soon he dismounted, hitched his horse off the trail and went forward on foot, having hidden his pouches and the bundle of old rags Handy had supplied him with.

He proceeded with the utmost caution, until he came in view of Eagle Rock.

The wind was light, and blowing toward him.

"They are there," he said, as he smelt tobacco-smoke.

Then he went toward the timber, and got a position where he saw a camp-fire that had been covered up, yet flashed up again.

"Now to the horses," muttered Pony Bob, and making a flank movement around the timber, he saw the meadow.

But the moonlight showed that the horses were not there.

"They've got them nearer at hand, and ready for moving."

"I must borrow one if I can."

Creeping into the timber, he soon found the horses all saddled and bridled.

Selecting one of the animals, as well as he could in the darkness, trying to get the best, he mounted him and rode back to where he had left his own animal.

Then he went to work "building his man," as he expressed it.

The blanket on the outlaw's horse and some leaves served as stuffing, and the old coat, pants, boots and hat, with the help of a lariat and stake-rope was soon a fair representative of a man and bound to the saddle of the outlaw's horse.

But try as he would, Pony Bob could not make the horse run the trail.

He turned and turned, and would not leave his horse.

"I am sorry to have you go, old fellow, for they may kill you; but you'll have to carry the target, and you bet I'll make this beast go, and the chances are that I'll have to hoof it yet."

"But I'll make this try first."

So saying Pony Bob transferred the dummy Pony Rider to his own horse, after changing saddle and bridle too, and then buckled the pouches about his shoulders.

"Now I am just due here," he muttered, glancing at his watch.

"Go!" he said to his horse, giving him a slap, and unmindful of what was ahead the splendid beast bounded forward to run the

trail just as though his rider was on his back.

Pony Bob did not hesitate an instant, but throwing himself into his saddle darted after the Pony Express horse.

But he only went for a short distance along the trail, and then, driving the spurs deep into the flanks of the horse he rode, he wheeled off obliquely, intending to flank the position held by the outlaws.

The valley there was not over four hundred yards in width, the trail running nearer the right side, under Eagle Rock, than to the left.

It was broken by a few large bowlders that had rolled down from the mountains on the left and here and there were a clump of trees.

Pony Bob's plan was to ride as far to the left as possible, and while the outlaws were trying to head off his dummy rider, to get by the narrow space and unseen and so keep on his way.

The "pony" dashed right ahead along the trail, and the clatter of his hoofs told the waiting outlaws that the Express Messenger was coming and on time.

They were upon their feet and ready in an instant.

"Halt!" yelled a voice as the horse came in sight, the "rider" leaning far over on one side as though to dodge a bullet.

But though the outlaw had commanded "halt," as though to be merciful, he followed it quickly with a shot.

But the rider did not fall and the flying horse was almost upon the outlaws.

"Riddle him with bullets!" yelled the voice of the outlaw leader, and it was heard by Pony Bob.

The volley of rifles that followed the command showed that there were half a dozen outlaws at least in the party.

But, though the storm of lead seemed to make the rider reel badly, he did not fall from his saddle, and again the clear, ringing voice of the chief was heard:

"Kill the horse!"

As he gave the order he leaped out in front of the horse, almost upon him, and fired his revolvers, his shot being followed by a rapid cracking of weapons at close quarters.

The doomed horse bounded into the air and fell heavily, riddled with bullets, rolling over the dummy rider lashed to his back.

CHAPTER L.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

"THAT'S King Cloven Hoof's voice—I have heard it before," said Pony Bob as the first command to halt reached his ears as he was speeding to get by on the further side of the valley.

Then came the shot, and again the voice was heard.

"Poor pony, you are doomed," murmured Pony Bob, and he added:

"Well, the row over there helps me go by."

Then came the command in the same clear voice to kill the horse.

"Poor pony," muttered Bob as the volley rung out, and he added:

"Handy was mistaken in the numbers, for there were over half a dozen outlaws there."

"I should have counted the horses."

Hardly had the words been uttered when Pony Bob found that the outlaws over by Eagle Rock were not all that there were.

The King of the Cloven Hoofs was present himself on the field and he left nothing to chance, he guarded well his flanks.

This Pony Bob discovered when he saw a man spring from behind a bowlder and fire at him.

Fortunately he missed.

Then another came out from the shadow of a tree and fired.

The bullet cut through the saddle-pouches he carried.

A third man, over by the rocks also fired, and Pony Bob felt that his horse was hit by the jump that he gave.

It began to look most serious for Pony Bob.

The King of the Cloven Hoofs had guarded the flanks of his position well, had thrown

a line of men across the little valley to the other side.

He knew how tricky Pony Bob was, and was determined he should not slip by on foot if he suspected danger at Eagle Rock.

But the men on guard across the valley had been so taken up with the firing at Eagle Rock, they had all been gazing in that direction and so it was that the real rider had gotten close upon them before he was seen.

Then to their horror they discovered that there were two Pony Riders and one of them seemed likely to go by, to dash through the line.

When he realized his danger, Pony Bob was not idle.

He quickly drew his revolver and opened fire.

He was a crack shot, and he sent two bullets first at the man nearest to him, then two more at the one under the tree, and the last two at the third man, over by the cliff.

He was anxious to try and wound each one.

The first man escaped, but the second one fell to his knees, tried to get up and toppled over.

The third seemed to have also escaped, for the Cloven Hoof called out:

"Kill Pony Bob, pards, or the King will kill us."

They had emptied their rifles, so now turned to their revolvers.

But Pony Bob was within fair range, and they opened.

As for the daring Pony Rider he had emptied his revolver, and one was all that he carried.

He had a derringer in his pocket, but this was kept for a last emergency and was not used at a distance.

So Pony Bob had to "take his medicine" as he said, as the outlaws gave it to him.

Another shot wounded his horse again, and he heard a bullet, and felt it, too, strike the thick leather pouches on his back.

He knew that the bullet would have entered his back but for the pouches.

Another bullet cut through the brim of his hat, and a third again wounded the unfortunate horse.

But Pony Bob was out of range now, and though his horse he felt was hard hit, he was still running well, and the rider was ready for a spring when he went down.

If he could only last him a quarter of a mile further he would be all right, as he could elude his foes on foot.

The yell of disappointment that the Cloven Hoofs gave vent to, when they found a dummy instead of Pony Bob, the latter heard and he smiled in his peculiar way and muttered:

"The way they'll swear would make a sea captain drown himself with envy."

"Just listen to that, now!"

The last remark was caused by hearing the chief's voice uttering most violent oaths, and then saying:

"Gone by us, you say?"

"By Heaven, but I'll shoot every man on that line!"

Pony Bob chuckled and muttered:

"I wish he'd shoot the whole outfit!"

Then came the ringing command:

"To your horses all and catch him!"

"That means me," muttered Pony Bob, and he drove the spurs deep.

He knew that the outlaws had all of three hundred yards to run to their horses, and by the time they were ready to start, he would have over half a mile the start of them.

If he had had his own horse he would have had nothing to fear, for he could have held his lead.

Even with his present mount he could have kept ahead for a long time, but the animal was wounded and weakening.

That the poor brute could not go very much further Pony Bob realized, and then it was a case of his being dismounted.

CHAPTER LI.

PURSUIT THE PONY RIDER.

PONY BOB was now serious, yet full of plot.

He felt that if dismounted he could take to the mountains and elude his pursuers.

But he wanted to plan so that they would not follow him.

How to do this he was considering.

With Pony Bob to consider was to act.

He was not long hitting upon a scheme.

Glancing over his horse, as he ran along in the moonlight, he saw that one of his wounds was in the flank.

That was the most serious one.

Another wound was in the neck and was bleeding freely.

The third wound was in the fleshy part of the hind leg.

"Pretty fair shooting that, for you got four wounds, the pouches two and my hat one."

"I got off well," muttered Pony Bob.

"Now, old fellow, you have served me well, and it seems a shame to have to do a cruel deed to you; but then it is best, all things considered—ah! you nearly went down, and are growing weaker."

"There is some timber ahead, and there you shall rest—a last, long rest."

To the timber the straining horse carried his rider and was then turned off the trail.

After riding a couple of hundred yards, Pony Bob forced the horse into a small thicket of undergrowth and dismounted.

"It seems a pity, but you might neigh and tell them I had not gone on still mounted."

"Good-by, old fellow, and don't bear any ill-feeling toward me if in the hereafter you ever see me in the horse heaven looking for a spirit mount."

So saying the Pony Rider took his knife and drove the long, sharp blade deep into the neck of the already dying horse.

As the animal fell he sprung aside, gathered his pouches close about him, reloaded his revolver, and walked rapidly back to the trail.

Reaching it he set out in a brisk trot which he had learned from the Indians and knew would carry him along at a six mile an hour pace.

He had gone but a short distance when he heard the clatter of hoofs after him.

"They are after me, and I was wise to kill the horse, for he might have betrayed that I was dismounted, and had they seen his dead body in the trail it would have also told the story."

"Now I can find a hiding-place and let them go by, and if they keep on and attack Gentleman George's station they will get a bitter dose, for Buffalo Bill is there by this time."

"I wonder if those shots I heard up by Eagle Rock, after I regained the trail, was the King of the Cloven Hoofs killing those men I got by as he threatened."

"Well, I won't mourn their loss, and they say that is the way King Cloven Hoof has of doing."

So musing, Pony Bob trotted himself along, no longer a rider but a runner.

He kept his head half turned as he ran, that he might watch for the coming of his pursuers, and one who saw him would have thought he was strangely reckless in that respect, as he held on until they were close upon him.

But Pony Bob knew that he was no longer running in the moonlight, but in thick timber where he could not be seen.

Then, too, he was anxious not to delay a minute longer than was necessary.

When he felt that he dared not take further chances, he dashed into a thicket just off the trail a few feet and crouched there.

"Couldn't be better," he muttered, as he saw that there was a break in the timber there and the whole party of pursuers would have to pass in full view of him.

A minute more and they were passing, and Pony Bob's eyes were riveted upon them.

The leader of the Cloven Hoofs was magnificently mounted upon a jet-black horse, handsomely saddled and bridled.

He rode with easiest grace, like one accustomed to the saddle from earliest boyhood.

He was dressed in black top-boots and a broad sombrero in which he wore a sable plume.

The moonlight shone full in his face for an instant as he passed, and Pony Bob saw that it was full-bearded, and that he wore his hair long.

Then he had paused, and he was riding at a run.

Behind him, riding in single file, came his followers, and Pony Bob took good care to count them.

"The Cloven Hoof chief and eight men."

"But there were more than that, for some body died this night back yonder under the shadow of Eagle Rock."

"Well, if I get through to-night, I'll find out on my way back, I'm afraid, more about them than I care to know."

With this he left his retreat and again began his brisk trot along the trail, much pleased with what he had thus far discovered.

CHAPTER LII.

A WOMAN'S WARNING.

For over half an hour did Pony Bob keep up his steady trot, going along the moonlit trail just as he had followed it often on horseback.

He did not seem to tire, and his eyes were constantly kept on the watch ahead, while he occasionally cast a backward glance.

He did not intend to run into a snare knowingly, and he was as determined that no one should overtake him, had any of the outlaws remained behind.

Suddenly, as he looked far ahead, he caught sight of a group of horsemen.

They had come to a halt in the trail, and he was not long in following their example.

But only for a minute, for he saw that the condition of the country just there was such that he could skit along the trail and keep hidden in the thickets and among the rocks.

He knew that he was within a few miles of Valley Farm Station, and he was anxious to get as near to the outlaws as possible to learn why they had stopped.

He had gotten to within a couple of hundred yards of them, and was then compelled to halt, for there was no thicket to hide him further.

Just where he halted he knew there was a broad trail branching off from the one he followed as a Pony Express Rider.

This trail wound around the thicket and not a dozen paces from where he was hiding.

He remembered that just here it was that Ed Darke, a Pony Rider, had been killed by the Cloven Hoofs, and Diamond Ned, another Pony Rider, had been trailed to this point, and then all trace of him was lost.

He had carried a valuable freight, and his going had been put down as a "mysterious disappearance."

A few, perhaps, had suspected that he had run off with the pouches, but those who knew him best resented the charge.

Like Jim Judson, another of the riders, who had disappeared in the same way near Wolf Den Pass, his fate was unknown.

Just where the trail led Pony Bob did not know, but now the Cloven Hoofs had halted suspiciously near it.

As Pony Bob watched the Cloven Hoofs he saw them start and come slowly back along the pony trail.

This move Pony Bob had not expected, and he at once thought that he had risked too much, for he dared not move then, as he might catch their eye, and to remain there where he was he felt was about as an unpleasant a duty as he could perform.

But he was in for it and so crouched close down between the two little scrub pines where he had taken refuge.

As they drew nearer to him Pony Bob saw that the chief still rode at the head of the horseman.

But he was not alone.

By his side rode a person upon whom Pony Bob's eyes were fastened in a way that fascinated him.

"A woman as sure as death is certain," came from between the Pony Rider's set teeth.

It was a woman and no mistake, and as the moonlight fell upon her, Pony Bob beheld a slender form clad in a dark habit, a sable sombrero and plume, and a masked face.

She was mounted upon a black horse, and her seat in the saddle was perfect.

The horses were now at a slow walk, and as they neared Pony Bob's position, he saw that the Cloven Hoof chief and the woman rode well in advance of the others.

They were talking, too, and in no low key and Pony Bob's ears drank in every word that was said:

"You are sure of this, that a large Pony Rider Patrol is going to scout along the trail to-night?" said the King of the Cloven Hoofs in an angry tone.

"Yes, our spy in the ranch came in with the news, and I came at once to warn you, for you told me that you would strike to-night Eagle Rock," answered the woman, and her voice was sweet-toned, though pitched a little high.

"You were prompt, as you always are, and we must go into hiding at once."

"I struck to night at Eagle Rock—let us halt here—but that sly devil, Pony Bob, dashed by us by a clever ruse, and we pursued him this far, when I halted for the rest of the men to come up, so we could go on and attack the station of Gentleman George and capture Pony Bob's freight and Buffalo Bill's, at the same paying off old scores."

"I'm a goner," muttered Pony Bob, for the man and woman had halted within fifteen feet of him.

"You had better call all your men off," said the woman.

"I will at once."

"There are five back on the trail, burying the dead, for Pony Bob killed one and I shot two for allowing him to break through their lines."

"They will soon be along."

"Send a man to hurry them up, while we ride on," said the woman, and Pony Bob said fervently:

"God bless that woman."

The chief's men had now halted near him, and calling to one to ride with all haste to Eagle Rock and hurry along the men there, as a Pony Riders' Patrol was on the trail, he rode on, accompanied by the woman and followed by the others.

They took the trail branching off around the pine thicket, while the messenger rode away in the direction of Eagle Rock.

Pony Bob waited until they were all out of sight, and heaving a big sigh of relief, he said:

"Choke yourself, Pony Bob, or you will yell for joy and have the whole gang back on top of you."

With this admonition to himself, he sprung to his feet and darted along the trail at a far better pace than he had been going before when forced to take shelter.

This pace he kept up until he neared the brook, and then before him two horsemen came into view.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE OUTLAW-HUNTERS.

"THE Pony Rider afoot!"

Such was Buffalo Bill's hail to Pony Bob, as he came in sight, and stopped his trot only when he reached the spot where the others awaited him.

"Don't mention it, Bill."

"I'm lucky to be on earth," responded Pony Bob, in his funny way.

"Had a hard time, pard?"

"Hard! well I guess so, at least it impressed me that way."

"But wait until I get my breathing-bellows calmed down and I will tell you—got another horse here?"

"No, but you can ride mine, for you are panting like a hound."

"I'm glad I'm panting, for my breath nearly left me awhile back."

"But how long will it take, Gentleman George, to get me a horse and rifle, that is if you would like to rope in some outlaws, five of them?"

"I will go immediately, Pony Bob; but is it far back on the trail?"

"A couple of miles, or a little over, but it seemed a good deal more to me."

"Suppose you bring the pouches I am to carry on and I will push through from there, and you, Pard Bill, can take mine now, and you'll find they've got bullet-holes in them too."

Without longer delay Gentleman George started back for his cabin, and the two pards were left alone.

"I'll tell you all about it, Bill, and you can tell Gentleman George on your way back."

"I'd like to have had one of Miss Lena's good suppers, only I would have lost too much time."

"How much am I behind?"

"Two hours only."

"I cannot make it up, especially if we are detained after those Cloven Hoofs; but I will not mind being a day behind if I can get even with those fellows, for if you could see my face distinctly you would see that I am badly scared yet."

"I guess not, Bob, for you don't scare easy."

"Wait until I tell you, Pard Bill," assured Pony Bob and he at once began his story, from telling of the value of his freight, and the warning of Handy the stock-tender, up to his plot to deceive the Cloven Hoofs and how he had carried it out.

Then he made known how he had had them overtake and pass him, and again how he had come upon them halted in the trail and added:

"Now who do you think halted them, Bill?"

"I do not know."

"It was a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, I knew I would surprise you, but it was a woman."

"She came out of that strange trail where Jordan disappeared, and she found them on their way to attack the station, for they were waiting for those fellows we are going after to come up."

"She told the King of the Cloven Hoofs that a patrol of Pony Riders was coming out to-night on the hunt for them, and he said they must go at once into hiding."

"How did she hear of the patrol, for it is not so?"

"She said it was reported by one of their spies, who had brought the news to the retreat, and she had come to tell him, the chief, knowing he was at Eagle Rock."

"Did she say no more?"

"No, and I wanted to ask her some questions but denied myself the pleasure."

"No doubt."

"And, Bill, do you know I heard the Cloven Hoof king say to her that I had killed one of his men, and he had shot two others for allowing me to break through their line."

"He said this, and he left five men to bury them, for you know the Cloven Hoofs make it a rule to always bury their dead, and to hide the graves so no one will find them and see that they have lost any of their hand."

"Yes, I know; but, Bob, do not speak of that woman to Gentleman George or any one else."

"All right, Pard Bill."

"I have a good reason for asking it, which I cannot explain now, for yonder comes the stock-tender."

Just then Gentleman George rode up, leading two horses behind him, and carrying the valuable pouches that Pony Bob was to carry on.

"I brought fresh horses for all of us while I was about it, gentlemen, for the others had been ridden, as you know, Mr. Cody, and we can hitch that horse here until we return."

"Lena put up your supper for you, too, Pony Bob, so you would not have to go back hungry."

"She has saved my life—just tell her so, Gentleman George," cried Pony Bob, as he took the little haversack of food Little Sunbeam had sent to him.

It was but a few minutes after the return of Gentleman George before they were ready to start, Pony Bob armed with a rifle which the stock-tender had brought him.

Away they went in a gallop, and the pace was not slackened until they drew near the trail.

Then they walked their horses and when they reached the spot, where Pony Bob had passed such an uncomfortable ten minutes, the three dismounted to try and see if they could find the trail of the party of outlaws they hoped to head off.

"We can tell if the tracks turn out of the Pony Trail into the other, as the others went past here, and then came back," said Pony Bob.

"Hark! they are coming now," cried Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LIV.

TAKING THEIR OWN MEDICINE.

THE warning words of Buffalo Bill caused Pony Bob and Gentleman George to at once follow him to shelter.

They had left their horses across the trail that branched off, behind some large rocks, and thither they quickly went to go into ambush.

No better spot could have been found for an ambush, for those in hiding were thoroughly protected by the rocks, and their foes would have to come within thirty feet of them before they turned into the trail.

Then too the party in ambush were in the shadow of some trees, while the outlaws would be out in the bright moonlight.

"There are more than five men in that party, Pony Bob," said Buffalo Bill as they all heard the hoofs of the coming outlaws.

"I remember now, Pard Bill, the chief sent a messenger back to tell the men to come right on and go into hiding on account of the Pony Patrol."

"That would make six."

"Yes, two to one, but then we are used to odds against us, and then we have the call."

"True, Pony Bob, but there are more than six horses coming there."

"I think you are right, Mr. Cody, for it sounds as though there were twice that number," said Gentleman George.

"Then I suppose we ought to git at once," Pony Bob remarked.

"Oh no; we are here to fight, Robert—not to run."

"Fight or run I'm with you, Pard Bill—with you to stay!"

"I well know that; but you have had your run to-night."

"If there are a dozen of them we must stampede them, that is all, and the report about the Pony Riders' Patrol will help us greatly."

"They will think they have struck a large force."

"And we won't detain them if they wish to go."

"No, Bob, we'll encourage their going; but there they come and I will halt them first, then fire."

"Giving them some of their own medicine from ambush," muttered Pony Bob, while Gentleman George remarked:

"Yes, and they should be made to take it—see, there are riderless horses there," and he pointed to the outlaws now plainly visible in the moonlight.

"Yes, they have the dead men's horses and their pack-animals with them. You were right, Pard Bill."

"And there are six men only."

"Now, stand ready."

As Buffalo Bill spoke, the six outlaws came up close to the ambush, and they were leading three horses with saddles on them and two pack-animals, eleven in all, and which showed how acute had been the hearing of Buffalo Bill, trained to detect the additional number.

"Halt! you are covered by the Pony Riders' Patrol!"

Buffalo Bill's voice resounded like a trumpet, and it brought the outlaws to a very sudden halt.

But only for an instant, and then there was an immediate stampede.

"Surrender, or die!" shouted Buffalo Bill.

But the outlaws were in no humor to halt, and letting go their led horses, and throwing themselves over low in their saddles, they broke in wild confusion.

Then came the command:

"Fire!"

The three rifles flashed together, and the revolvers of the three men began to play rapidly upon the stampeded Cloven Hoofs.

The fire of the rifles had been deadly, for two of the outlaws dropped from their saddles, and a third went off clinging hard to his horse.

There was a horse went down, too, under the revolver fire, but in less than a minute the fugitives were out of sight, leaving their two dead comrades, their pack-horses and the led animals.

"Well, it is a victory, and worth being behind time for."

"I tell you, the Cloven Hoofs are getting cleaned out fast, for the one I killed, and the two the chief shot at Eagle Rock, with this pair, make five to night."

"I can account for another one, Pony Bob, and when Wild Bill came in to the ranch he brought a dead outlaw and Kit Kirby, the Red Danite, as a prisoner—making eight for a day and night's work."

"Good! we Pony Riders will yet have our revenge; but, do you mean that Red Hand, the Danite Captain, is a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"That is a great victory, for he is the lieutenant of the Cloven Hoofs and about the worst man in these parts."

"But, I must be off, and I guess I'll find no obstruction in the way now, and will get these pouches safely to the fort."

"Good-night, pard; and, Gentleman George, tell Miss Lena that I will eat the nice supper she sent me when I get to Handy's station."

With this Pony Bob mounted his horse and rode rapidly away in the moonlight, while Buffalo Bill said:

"We must be off too, pard, for when not pursued those fellows may return."

"We'll take those bodies along, do you not think so?"

"Oh, yes, and we have got some fine animals here, I see," answered Gentleman George, pointing to the horses they had captured from the outlaws.

In ten minutes the bodies were strapped in the saddle, and with the half-dozen horses in lead Buffalo Bill and Gentleman George started on their return to the station.

CHAPTER LV.

BUFFALO BILL'S RETURN TRAIL.

"THE shadow of death is always hovering over us in this savage land," murmured Lena Ross as she beheld her father and Buffalo Bill ride into the stockade with the bodies of the two outlaws, and the captured horses.

"My child, it is a land of crime and revenge in its wild state, and we knew all that it was before we came."

"For two purposes we came here, for a retreat and to avenge, and we must submit."

These words were spoken in a low tone by Gentleman George, in answer to what his daughter had said; but they reached the ears of Buffalo Bill and gave him an insight into the motive of the father and daughter in coming to the Wild West.

Lena had his supper all ready for him, and the Pony Rider sat down and ate it with a relish, while Gentleman George, having Buffalo Bill's horse awaiting him outside, told his daughter the story of Pony Bob's adventures and their having ambushed the outlaws.

When he was ready to start Buffalo Bill said:

"It is just three o'clock so I am three and a half hours behind time."

"I can make up some of it, but fear I may be further delayed with Silent Sam, for he goes back to headquarters with me, unless he gets the best of me."

"Which is not likely; but I think you are wise, Buffalo Bill, to take the man prisoner, as there is no telling what a supposed friend, yet a traitor, may do," Gentleman George returned.

With a word of farewell Buffalo Bill went out of the cabin, the father and daughter accompanying him, and mounting rode rapidly out of the stockade gate and away on the trail.

The moon, in its third quarter was low in the horizon, yet still lighted his way, though in the darkness he was wont to ride at the same sweeping pace.

Mile after mile was left behind, the horse being driven to its greatest speed, and the stations were reached and only tarried at long enough for a word with the stock-tender to explain delay and a change of horses.

The moon went down behind the mountains, and still in the darkness Buffalo Bill drove on.

The gray of dawn at last appeared, and then the east grew rosy with the approach of sunrise, and the straining horse was still kept at his utmost speed.

The different horses he had mounted at the relay stations were all fine ones, and Buffalo Bill was glad to note as he glanced at his watch when nearing Silent Sam's station,

that he had cut the time he was behind down nearly two hours.

"Good riding that."

"Never did better," he said with pardonable pride.

Soon he began to approach Silent Sam's station, and he nerved himself for what was before him.

Wholly doubting the man now, he felt that he must be prepared for any act on his part of lawlessness.

Failing to down him on his westward run, Buffalo Bill feared that he might be the better prepared to do so when he arrived this time.

So he looked to his revolver, and was ready for any emergency when he swept around the bend into view of the cabin.

There sat Silent Sam, smoking his pipe and as Buffalo Bill drew rein he said:

"Well, is you ready for your horse?"

"You know that I am ready."

"Why are you not also?"

"I can't sit up all night, when you are behind time this a way."

"Can't you?"

"No."

"Well, that is what you draw pay for, and you have little enough to do."

"I'm all alone, while the other stations has two and three men."

"It was your own wish to be alone, for you said you preferred it and would do all the work."

"Now I know why."

"Why?"

"You are an infernal traitor—"

"Up with your hands!" and Buffalo Bill's revolver covered the man.

Silent Sam's face became ashen in hue, for he felt he was wholly caught.

He had not expected it, and in fact was preparing to spring a little game of his own, when he was thus caught off his guard.

For an instant he did not know just what to do, but at last got nerve enough to call out:

"Now, pard!"

Quickly the left fist of Buffalo Bill shot out straight from the shoulder and smashed the stock-tender full in the face, sending him to earth as though he had been struck with a club.

Seeming to know just what his blow would do, Buffalo Bill leaped over the form of Silent Sam, and reached the corner of the cabin, just as the door on the other side swung open and a tall man with masked face sprung out and shouted:

"Is he coming, Sam, for I'm ready?"

"Hands up, quick!" cried Buffalo Bill, now roused to desperate action.

CHAPTER LXI.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE man who came out of the cabin had evidently been sleeping, for he seemed to be ignorant of Buffalo Bill's arrival on the scene.

The call of Silent Sam had awakened him, and he came out in his sock feet, hatless and a revolver in his hand, while the mask that covered his face had been hastily put on.

Had he been more wide awake he would perhaps have realized that he made a mistake in not only disobeying Buffalo Bill's command to surrender, but particularly in doing as he did, which was to fire as a response to it.

The shot struck the revolver of Buffalo Bill, knocking it out of his grasp and benumbing his hand with the shock.

But it is in an emergency that Buffalo Bill is at his best, and just as the man fired again he had his other revolver drawn in his left hand and leveled, while he cried:

"Surrender! or I will have to kill you."

The second shot of the man buried itself in the cabin near the head of Buffalo Bill, who, seeing that the man was about to fire again and would not surrender, took quick aim at his right hand and knocked the revolver from his grasp.

"Now hands up!" cried the Pony Rider.

But Buffalo Bill's masked foe was dead game, and with his right hand useless he also drew a revolver in his left and fired a third shot that was a very close call, as it was flattened against the large and heavy buckle of the Pony Rider's belt.

"I'll give you a stronger hint, for I don't wish to kill you," cried Buffalo Bill as he stepped back under the force of the bullet's blow on his belt, and he sent a bullet through the right arm of his plucky enemy, who fired at the same time.

The bullet tore its way through the fleshy part of the man's arm, and the blow caused him to drop the revolver, and with a bound like a panther Buffalo Bill was upon his enemy and dealt him a stunning blow with his left.

It brought the man to his knees, and he shouted:

"Come, Sam, or we are both goners!"

This warning cry saved Buffalo Bill, who had forgotten Silent Sam in the moment of excitement, and he saw that he must act quickly and severely.

Down on the head of his adversary, who was trying to pinion his arms about his waist, he brought his revolver with a force that stunned the man, for he fell over as though dead.

Turning, Buffalo Bill was just in time to see Silent Sam struggling in a half-dazed way to get his revolver from his belt.

"Quit that, Silent Sam!" he shouted, and in an instant he was springing toward him.

"Don't shoot, Bill, for I was going to help you," he shouted in terror.

Buffalo Bill laughed in a cynical way that rivaled Wild Bill's most telling sarcasm, and said:

"All right, I'll help you—hands up!"

"What has I done?"

"Quick! or I fire and I will be able to handle you better dead than alive!"

Up went the hands, and taking a lariat off of a peg on the cabin, Buffalo Bill bound the traitor's hands behind him in no gentle manner, at the same time keeping his eye upon the other one he had to fear.

With Silent Sam safe, he went to the other and jerked the mask off of his face.

The look of utter amazement that was on the face of Buffalo Bill was almost ludicrous as he recognized the man.

"Great Scott! it is Red Hand, the Danite, or may I be struck dead for lying."

"How on earth did you get here, or have the boys hanged you since I left and you are your ghost?"

"Or are there two of you?"

"No, the country could not stand your double, for you are the biggest devil I know, though your Cloven Hoof chief is running you a close race for first place."

"Come, don't possum, for I saw you signal to Silent Sam."

"I'm wounded and suffering," growled the man.

"Bah! a shattered finger, a flesh-wound in the arm and a gash in the scalp don't hurt a man like you, as I would quickly find out, if you got the chance."

"I'll dress your wounds, however, for I do not wish to be cruel, as soon as I have secured you."

With this Buffalo Bill tied the man's legs securely, and saw that he had no weapons.

Then he bound up his bullet-shattered finger, and the wound in the arm, and bandaged his head where the revolver-barrel had cut into the scalp.

"You've got a hard head, or my blow with my left would have knocked you out, for it bruised you, I see."

"And you, Silent Sam, have got a black eye to remember me, and it is lucky it is no worse."

"My hand is numb yet, Red Danite, from the shock of your bullet, which, you see, shattered my revolver."

"But we must not delay here, as I am away behind now; but, Sam, tell me who was your pard that was here yesterday."

"There was no one here."

"Oh, yes, there was, for I saw him, and it was not Kit Kirby here, for I left him in the lock-up at the ranch."

"There wasn't no one here."

"All right, seeing is believing; but come, we must be off as soon as I have had a look through your cabin."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE PONY RIDER'S RETURN.

THE search of Silent Sam's cabin seemed to surprise Buffalo Bill, for he filled a bag with some of the things he found there, and locking the door put the key in his pocket.

Then he took Red Devil and two of the best horses in the corral, and saddling them forced his prisoners to mount.

Tying the bridles of the two horses, ridden by the prisoners, together, he took two long lariats to serve as reins, and fastened the ends to the bits, when he mounted Red Devil, and with a bullwhacker found in the cabin as his whip, he set the animals off in a run.

Away went the two horses along the trail, driven by Buffalo Bill, his two prisoners bound in their saddles, and the animals encouraged by a blow of the long bullwhacker when they slackened their pace for an instant.

This pace was kept up steadily, for Buffalo Bill was anxious to cut as much off of the time he was behind as was possible.

"I'll get in two hours late in spite of all," he muttered, as they flew along.

As they neared Wolf Den Pass, Buffalo Bill suddenly reined in his horses.

His piercing eyes had seen some horsemen ahead.

But the slack-up was only for an instant, as the Pony Rider quickly recognized that the horsemen were not outlaws.

"It is Wild Bill, and on the search for me."

"A pretty pickle I'd be in if they were some of your cut-throat gang, Kit Kirby," he said.

The Danite made no reply, and in a few minutes Wild Bill, Little Lone Star and the other two Pony Riders came at a run to meet them.

"Bravo, my boy, you are on earth yet," and Wild Bill grasped the hand of his best pard.

"Yes, and I have company for dinner, as you see."

"Holy Smoke and the Kilkenny Cats of Old Ireland! where did you get that thing, and what has Silent Sam been doing?"

"Nothing, Pard Bill; I'm as innocent as a Quaker. It's only Buffalo Bill's plan to down me," cried Silent Sam.

"I guess he's done it," was Wild Bill's response, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"I am too much behind to tarry here and tell the story, pards, but you shall have it when I reach camp."

"Now let us push for the post as fast as I can drive my team along the trail."

"But let me thank you all for coming to look me up, for I guess you thought I had been lost in the shuffle."

So the horses were started once more and away the whole party sped along the Pony Trail, the shouts of the Pony Riders as they dashed along, keeping the horses of the prisoners up to their full speed.

Their coming was heard before they came in sight, and when they dashed into the view of the crowd gathered at the post, what it all meant was not known until Buffalo Bill drew up his team before Captain Starbuck.

The escape of the prisoner from the lock-up had already become known, as the man on guard over him had been found by the relief, sitting upright before the lock-up, and tied in that position.

His hat was drawn down over his eyes, and those who had seen him had supposed he was asleep, but as he was there at his post, and his prisoner within the stout log-cabin was in irons, nothing was thought of it, until a Pony Rider, shortly after the departure of Wild Bill to look for Buffalo Bill, had discovered the real situation.

The guard was dead, a knife thrust in his heart, and the prisoner was gone.

But how, when or by whose aid no one could tell, and Captain Starbuck had just called the men together when Buffalo Bill came in sight.

A wild cheer went up from the crowd as it was seen that Buffalo Bill had as a prisoner the escaped Kit Kirby, and Captain Starbuck cried with enthusiasm:

"Well, old Reliable, you are back again, and if signs don't lie you have had a hard time of it."

"But I am delighted to see you have recaptured our prisoner, but cannot understand what Silent Sam is doing in trouble."

"I will soon tell you, Captain Starbuck, for he is a traitor, and he was harboring the Red Danite here in his cabin."

"I have proof enough to hang him, sir, as a spy of the Cloven Hoofs; but the Danite

needs the surgeon's care, sir, as I was forced to wound him twice and then smash him over the head with my revolver before he had enough."

"I am glad you did not hurt him more seriously, Buffalo Bill, for he was born to be hanged, though I say it who must try him."

"Lone Star, take charge of the prisoners, and doctor, you see to their wounds, for Silent Sam looks as though a mule had kicked him in the face."

"It was that wild devil's first," growled Silent Sam as he was led away, while the man addressed as doctor, whose real name was Massey, but whom the boys called "Old Blue Mass," followed briskly, for he was paid by the company so much a patient and was therefore glad to get some work to do.

Some there were who said Old Blue Mass growled whenever he heard of a man being killed instead of wounded; but at any rate he was a fine physician and surgeon.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE PATROL OF THE PONY TRAIL.

Tired and hungry though he was, Buffalo Bill, as soon as Wild Bill had mounted a fresh horse and was off with the freight he had brought in, accompanied Captain Starbuck to his quarters to tell the story of his last thrilling ride to Valley Farm and back and thus show that he had reason for his delay.

Captain Starbuck listened most attentively to the whole story, jotting down notes here and there and asking questions which he deemed necessary.

He seemed surprised when Buffalo Bill told him that he had suspected Silent Sam of being crooked for some time, and asked:

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I accuse no man without proof, sir, so I waited until I had it."

"And nearly lost your life in securing your proof."

"You are too just, Cody, if I may say such a thing."

"I'd rather err on the side of justice, sir, than wrong a man without cause."

"Well, you are fortunately one to keep your eyes open, have the courage of your opinions and the strength, pluck and determination to carry out your plans, so I cannot say a word."

"Now about the rest of your run."

Buffalo Bill continued his story, told of his strategy in passing the outlaws, and his arrival at Valley Farm to find Pony Bob behind time.

The search for Pony Bob, finding him afoot, the ambush of the outlaw, the story of Bob's adventures and the return to Gentleman George's station and start from it was all told.

Then Buffalo Bill made known his belief that the man seen at Silent Sam's cabin on his run westward, was the spy that had informed the outlaws that a Pony Patrol was to be sent over the line.

That a woman had made known the fact to the chief of the Cloven Hoofs Buffalo Bill told, but requested the captain to keep the fact quiet as he was working a plot that would perhaps discover just who she was, and then it might get to the ears of the "King" that the Pony Riders knew of her existence, and he was one to be merciful to no one.

"The truth is, Captain Starbuck, it is my duty to tell you that it was not Little Sunbeam who came here as my witness, and I have every reason to believe that the one who did is my mysterious Girl Guide, the one who Pony Bob says warned the outlaws of the patrol, and if she did I believe it was to draw them off the trail for us to go through, unless a spy had really gone in with the news."

"Has there been any talk of sending out a patrol, sir, since I left?"

"I did consider it, yes."

"Did you speak to any one about it?"

"Yes, I told Rocket Rob that I thought of doing so, and that my intention was to send out thirty riders, to patrol to the end of Pony Bob's ride back again, and over your and Wild Bill's run; but, Cody, the news you bring me takes me all aback."

"Captain Starbuck, do you know if Rocket Rob left camp before I started on my last run?"

"Not with leave."

"Can you find out quietly, sir, if he did, and how long he was away?"

"I guess so."

"But why?"

"Well, sir, I only got a glimpse of the man whom I first saw with Silent Sam, yet somehow it will come before my mind that it was Rocket Rob."

"You do not surely suspect him of being a traitor?"

"You just said I was too just to accuse any one without full proof, so I will not say that he is a traitor; but if he has been away from camp, leaving before I left on my run, and returning last night, then I believe he was the man I saw with Silent Sam."

"It seems impossible."

"Yet, sir, Pony Bob heard the woman distinctly say that one of their spies brought the news of the Pony Patrol, and you spoke to Rocket Rob about it before I left on my run."

"Now I thought the man I saw was Rocket Rob, and we know that news does not get out of this camp that we try to keep secret."

"Then, captain, we also are aware that Tony was found dead on his post of guard duty this morning, and the Red Danite had escaped, so that shows he had help from within the camp."

"All these things considered, as well as what Fearless Frank confessed to me when dying, that Rocket Rob and his pals were to be spies on my track, shows that they may all be black sheep, and of Rocket Rob less is known than of any Pony Rider in camp."

"Though a good man for the work he has never been popular, and just who and what he is no one seems to know, and I am suspicious of him."

"I feel that you are right, Buffalo Bill, and I will find out regarding his leaving camp, and about the killing of poor Tony and the Danite's escape last night."

"Now go and get your dinner and seek rest, for you are as haggard as though you had been sick, and I am going to send a Pony Patrol under Little Lone Star, to ride to the end of Pony Bob's run and back over the whole of my division to the end of Wild Bill's run."

An hour after the Pony Patrol of thirty men, under command of Lone Star, rode out of the camp to go the length of the trail of Captain Starbuck's Division.

CHAPTER LIX.

BUFFALO BILL SETS A TRAP.

BUFFALO BILL went to his cabin, where Black Diamond served him with the best dinner to be had in the camp, and gave him a warm welcome as well.

The Pony Rider then turned in for a long sleep until supper, and he hoped that when he awoke Captain Starbuck would have some news for him as to whether he was right in his suspicion regarding Rocket Rob.

But when Buffalo Bill reported at headquarters, just after dark, the captain told him that so far as he could learn Rocket Rob had not been out of camp during the time specified.

"Captain, I still cling to my belief, so may I ask you to do me a favor?"

"Certainly."

"Will you go into my cabin and hide behind the curtain which shuts the sleeping-end off from the living-end, and permit me to take Silent Sam out of the lock-up and bring him there?"

"I will."

"I wish to have a talk with him that you may hear, and it is better to promise him terms than not to know who the spy of the Cloven Hoofs is that is in our camp."

"You are right there, Cody."

"I can also glean something afterward from the Red Danite, though not by offering terms, and you can judge between the stories of the two men."

"That was why I asked you to confine them separately, so they could concoct no plan together."

"In other words, you'll lay a trap for them both to fall into?"

"Yes, sir, and spring the trap only when Rocket Rob gets into it."

"You still stick to your belief of his treachery?"

"Yes, sir, but am willing to admit I am wrong when I have the proof of it."

"Very well, go and get Silent Sam, and I will at once go to your cabin."

"And ask Black Diamond to see that no one enters the cabin, sir, for I can take him there without being seen by any one but the guard."

A few minutes after Buffalo Bill reported to the guard that Captain Starbuck had sent him to take Silent Sam to him, but he would not keep him long away.

"Sam, sit down there, for I may as well tell you that you can tighten or loosen the rope about your neck by what you say," said Buffalo Bill when the prisoner entered his cabin.

"What has you got to say?"

"You know that this company is running the Pony Express for profit to the owners, it charges big prices, but pays all losses, and to keep up a first class standard for square dealing, it employs only the best of men, those who can be trusted."

"Yet it has almost a trackless country to operate in, it has the Indians to fight, the Mormons are not over friendly and the outlaws along the trail are its bitterest foes."

"Now and then a man proves false to the trust in him, you for instance, and to protect itself, the company is willing to grant favors."

"But, it must know who its secret foes are, and you are the one who can tell."

"No, I can't."

"Don't lie to me, Silent Sam, for I'll show you how much I already know, and convince you that my testimony will hang you."

"You don't know nothin'."

"I know something, though."

"I know that I did not first approach your cabin at a run yesterday, but in a walk, for I was then suspicious of you, and when I saw what I did, I drew back around the bend and went up at full speed."

"What did you see?"

"I saw you and Rocket Rob together, and when I came up he was in the cabin, where you tried to entice me that he might do what you did not have the nerve to do—kill me."

"Tain't so."

"It is so, as he will say if I allow him the chance I now give you of saving your neck."

"Then, if he's going to squeal, I does," said the man, excitedly.

"You will tell what I desire to know, then?"

"You bet I will, now he's gone and admitted he was at my cabin and we plotted to kill you."

"Then, you admit this?"

"I'll talk out if my life is to be spared."

"I'll promise that you shall not be hanged."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

"Does the captain say so?"

"I do," and Captain Starbuck stepped out of his concealment and confronted the startled prisoner.

"I'm beat, so I'll talk," said Silent Sam.

"I'll give you your life, a horse and weapons, a month's provisions, and pay you the money due you, and which you left in my keeping, on condition that you truthfully answer all questions either Buffalo Bill or myself put to you."

"Then, you are to appear as a witness, after which you can go your way, join the outlaws if you wish, only keep out of our way, for if you again fall into my hands I will hang you."

"You bet I'll keep out of your way, and of the Cloven Hoofs also, for they would kill me for telling what I know."

"I'll go East, for I've got a little money saved."

"You are wise—now talk," said Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LX.

TO SAVE HIS NECK.

"Shoot yer questions at me, and I'll respond, now I knows I won't have to hang if I give the snap away," said Silent Sam, now most willing to tell all that he knew to save his own life.

"In the first place you are a spy of the Cloven Hoofs?"

"I are."

"How long have you been their spy?"

"Six weeks."

"What caused you to join them?"

"Well, I guess it was money."

"They offered you money?"

"Yes, gave me money."

"How much?"

"I've got about four hundred dollars so far."

"What have you done?"

"I put it in their way to rope in some rich freight."

"By their killing the Pony Riders?"

"About that."

"How came you to go in with the Cloven Hoofs?"

"Rocket Rob told me it would be a good deal."

"Rocket Rob did?"

"Yes, he arranged it all."

"Who else in this camp is in the Cloven Hoofs' pay besides Rocket Rob?"

"No one."

"Not one of his pards?"

"Jockey Jack was, but he's passed in."

"No one else?"

"I'll tell you, Buffalo Bill, as I said I would."

"There was no one else in the game here that was in with the outlaws; but Fearless Frank and me had a little game—yer see I'm spoutin' Gospel now—and we was to light out together."

"He was to nail you, get the pouches and bring 'em to me, and let all think the Cloven Hoofs did it."

"But you was too fly for him and he went under."

"And Rocket Rob and his pards knew nothing of this?"

"You bet they didn't, for it was our call, and we were going to light out together."

"Then Phantom Phil and Daring Dick are loyal to the company?"

"They are as far as I have heard, but there is no telling how long before they go wrong, for Rocket Rob could tempt an angel."

"And there is no one else in this camp that you believe is treacherous?"

"Not one; but Rocket Rob will kill me if he ever gets off, and the Cloven Hoofs will if he don't."

"He will not kill you, and you can be a long way from here before the Cloven Hoofs know that you told on them, that is, unless there is another spy of theirs in camp to tell on you, so you had better think well if there is, so we can put a stop on him too."

"There is no one else, and you bet I'd tell if I thought so even, Buffalo Bill."

"Nor along the line eastward or westward?"

"The Cloven Hoofs have got spies at starting points, but I don't know them of course."

"What do you know of the King of the Cloven Hoofs?"

"What others do."

"What is that?"

"Next to nothin'."

"You have seen him?"

"Yes, he came to the cabin and swore me into the band."

"Tell me about him."

"He's a handsome fellow, with long beard and hair, a perfect gentleman in looks and manners, but he has the heart of a tiger and holds power over his men to kill when he wishes, or thinks they deserve it, and kill he does."

"Do you know where his retreat is?"

"I don't."

"You do but won't tell."

"No, he always sent his messengers to me and I never knew."

"Have you heard of his having any one in camp besides his men?"

"There is a woman there, or rather a young girl, and he calls her his mascot."

"She is as pretty as a picture the men told me, for she wore a mask when she came to my cabin with the king; but she spoke to me and her voice was as sweet as flute music."

"Is she his wife?" asked Captain Starbuck.

"The men said she was his daughter."

"How old a man is he?"

"Over forty I should say."

"And the girl?"

"There's no telling what a woman's age might be—besides I didn't see her face."

"All right, Silent Sam, see that you bear out your name and tell no one why you came here."

"Now I will take you back."

"And the cap'n won't forgit and hang me?"

"You have my word, Silent Sam, and I never break it to friend or foe."

"I guess that's so, cap'n, from what I have heard of you," and with this Silent Sam was led away by Buffalo Bill to whom Captain Starbuck said:

"Come to my quarters, Cody, in about a quarter of an hour."

Captain Starbuck then went to his cabin and sent a man up to the quarters of Rocket Rob, asking him to come there as quickly as he could upon a matter of importance.

Rocket Rob was not long in reporting to the agent, who was writing at his desk, and simply bade him be seated.

He kept on with his writing until he heard a quick, firm step outside that he seemed to recognize, and just as the door opened and Buffalo Bill appeared in it, he said:

"Now, Rocket Rob, we will have a little talk together."

CHAPTER LXI.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

"YES, captain, how can I serve you?" said Rocket Rob.

Without answering the question, Captain Starbuck turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"Ah, Cody, I am glad you dropped in, for I may need your aid."

"Sit down there."

The agent emphasized the word there, so Buffalo Bill took the seat indicated.

He saw that Rocket Rob had but just come in, and understood the words of Captain Starbuck that he might need his aid.

"Now, Rocket Rob, I wished to ask you," and the agent turned again to the Pony Rider, and after a moment's hesitation continued:

"To aid me in running down the Cloven Hoofs."

"It is no easy matter, sir, but I will do all I can in the matter."

"Where do you think their retreat can be found?"

"I have no idea, sir; but it cannot be far off the trail between here and Valley Farm, as on that run they are more frequently seen."

"Perhaps Buffalo Bill could tell you, sir," and Rocket Rob had a peculiar look on his face as he glanced toward Cody.

"Perhaps so—I'll ask him later."

"But he is on regular runs, you know, and you on 'waiting-orders,' so you have the time, and I wished to ask you if you could take a company out in search of the Cloven Hoofs."

"I could, sir, but fear it would be useless."

"Suppose I sent you as guide with a company, Buffalo Bill to get a substitute for his ride and go in command, and tell you that if you did not lead the Pony Riders to the camp of the Cloven Hoofs I would hang you upon your return."

The man started, glanced quickly at the impassible face of Buffalo Bill, then back at the agent.

Then he said with a light laugh:

"That would be rather hard treatment of me, sir."

"It will be just what you deserve and will receive, Rocket Rob."

"Captain Starbuck, I will not—"

"You will keep your hands away from your belt, Rocket Rob, for I have you covered," said Buffalo Bill, and he held his revolver in his hand.

"What does this mean?" gasped the man, now white as a corpse.

"Disarm him, Cody!"

Rocket Rob would have resisted, but the hand of Buffalo Bill fell upon his shoulder with a grip of iron, and he saw that in the eyes that looked down deep into his own which cowed him.

Quickly he was disarmed and the weapons laid upon the desk before the division

boss, or "governor" as the men often called him.

"Rocket Rob, I wish to tell you that your treachery is known."

"I know that you are a secret member of the Cloven Hoof band, that you are their spy in this camp, and a sharer in the booty they get by killing and robbing Pony Express Riders."

"It is false!"

"I swear it is false, and Buffalo Bill you shall die for this, for I know that this charge comes from you because you are envious of me, yes, and fear me," shouted the accused man, his eyes burning and face livid.

"Well, Rocket Rob, I will not deny my responsibility in this matter, for I suspected you, and more, had proof of your guilt, for I saw you at Silent Sam's cabin."

"It was not me you saw there."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

Buffalo Bill laughed and said:

"Self-convicted, for I did not say yesterday."

"But it was yesterday that I saw you."

"A clever catch that, Bill," said the captain, admiringly, while the prisoner closed his teeth with a snap, as he realized how he had made a mistake.

"I was not away from this camp yesterday," said Rocket Rob presently.

"I have proof that you were."

"I know that you left camp two hours ahead of me, and you went out along the mountain trail."

"You went to Silent Sam's cabin, for I saw you there, and you were anxious to get a shot at me without risking your own life, but I was on to your little game."

"You came back to camp after nightfall, and slipped into your cabin."

"Who says this?"

"I was told it ten minutes ago by one whose simple word I would take against your oath on a stack of Bibles."

"Who says this of me?"

"Black Diamond."

"That nigger."

"A negro, yes, but an honest-hearted, noble fellow."

"Did Black Diamond say that, Cody?"

"Yes, captain."

"Then no further proof is needed of Rocket Rob's guilt, and I shall hold him for trial to-morrow, for he and the Red Danite shall be tried together, you giving your testimony before you go your run, and Wild Bill after he comes in."

"Now we will take this man to safe quarters for the night."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE ACCUSED.

THE news spread like wildfire, that Rocket Rob was under arrest, and that a strong guard had been placed over him for the night.

What it was all about no one seemed to know, but some one reported that Buffalo Bill had caused the arrest of his Pony Rider comrade.

Some one else suggested to Phantom Phil and Daring Dick that they should go to Cody's cabin and resent this act against their pard.

But Phantom Phil replied:

"This is not my quarrel, pards, and I am afraid it will be if I chip in against Buffalo Bill's play."

"I was in it for Jockey Jack, and I saw that the Buffalo Bill trio held trump cards in this here camp, and I swim with the current."

"I'm awful sorry for Rob, but he's been in some mischief, I am afraid, and I hain't in the game."

"Ditto me," said Daring Dick, and they went to their quarters to talk over the arrest of their comrade and leader, and were very anxious on their own account, not knowing what the charges were against him.

"It's his going away from camp," said Dick.

"Yes, and we lied for him, as we did for Fearless Frank, and now we may be dragged in."

"I tell you, Pard Dick, I'm afraid Rocket Rob has been playing some game with cards up his sleeve."

"Yes, that's so; but, if we are called in, we'll tell what we knows, say I."

"Ditto me."

Buffalo Bill meanwhile had again gone to his cabin and his bed, to catch up on sleep, as he would have a hard day before him on the morrow.

Black Diamond called him to breakfast at seven o'clock and said:

"Court is called for eight o'clock at the cap'n's quarters, Massa Bill, and I'm told to be thar, too."

"Yes, Diamond, you are to tell when you saw Rocket Rob leave camp and return," said Buffalo Bill, and he devoted himself to the flap-jacks Black Diamond had made for him.

It was just eight o'clock when Captain Starbuck opened the frontier "court."

Everybody was there that could get there, and all was curiosity to know what it was all about.

The captain sat before his desk with paper, pen and ink before him, and in front of him sat the three prisoners, Kit Kirby, the Danite, Silent Sam and Rocket Rob.

The Pony Riders were all there and the stablemen, several settlers and miners, and all of the camp stragglers.

"Gentlemen, I open this court not by the law of civilized lands, but by the laws of justice, and to try before it men accused of crimes for which the punishment out here is death.

"We have no military near to turn the prisoners over to, nor any courts where they could be tried, and the one who had the most brilliant lawyer to defend him go free in spite of his guilt.

"These men are accused of crimes against an honest company risking much capital to send mail and Express matter across the continent.

"They are accused of crimes against ourselves. By us they must be tried, and they shall have a fair hearing.

"That there may be no one to say to the contrary, I shall select from those present six men, and the fate of the prisoners must hang upon their decision, whether they, the jury, find them guilty or innocent upon the testimony given."

Such was the opening address of the captain, acknowledged by all as the "Boss," their commander, manager, judge, jury and executioner if so he chose to become.

His words were received with applause, and then he began his selection of a jury.

Three Pony Riders, one stock-tender, a settler and a miner, and all were looked upon by their companions as the best choice that could be made.

When they were seated on a bench facing the prisoners, the captain said:

"We will first try Silent Sam, the stock-tender."

Silent Sam looked terribly scared at this and glanced appealingly at the captain and then at Buffalo Bill.

"Buffalo Bill, you are the witness against this man.

"Tell the jury what you know of him."

Buffalo Bill arose and told his story—first of his suspicions against the stock-tender, then of seeing a man there—whose name he did not mention however—and last, of his return there and finding that Silent Sam and his companion, the Red Danite, intended to kill him.

He modestly described the duel with the two men, and how he had captured them both and brought them in to camp.

"Does this witness tell the truth, Silent Sam?"

"He does, sir."

All looked surprised and none more so than Red Hand, the Danite, and Rocket Rob, who were seen to glance quickly toward each other.

"You plead to this charge innocent or guilty, prisoner?"

"I am guilty, sir," was the prompt reply.

CHAPTER LXIII.

GUILTY.

THAT he plead guilty was another surprise for all, and every eye turned upon the avowed culprit.

There he sat, very white, very nervous and looking in a most pleading manner toward the captain and Buffalo Bill, who, he

well realized, held his fate for life or death in their hands.

"Silent Sam, though guilty of treachery and intention to kill, you did not have the opportunity to take the life of Buffalo Bill, and as you have acknowledged your guilt and can give us most valuable information, I here state that you shall go from this camp a free man, as soon as the fate of the other prisoners is settled, be the verdict for or against them.

"I take this right upon myself of pardon, feeling that we receive a full equivalent for sparing you.

"Now, I will call before the jury Rocket Rob, the Pony Rider."

The man came to the seat designated, and if looks could kill, the glance he cast at Silent Sam would have laid him out like a stab in the heart.

"Rocket Rob, it was reported to me that you were a traitor, and I found it so hard to believe that I demanded proof.

"Buffalo Bill, you will tell the jury what proof you have that this man was treacherous to his employers and his comrades."

"I have told the jury that I saw a man at Silent Sam's cabin, when I first went there, and that the stock-tender afterward denied it.

"That man I then thought was Rocket Rob, though I could hardly believe my eyes.

"I now know that it was Rocket Rob, and that he went there to kill, me, leaving the money he got from the Express with Silent Sam until they could get away with it, and let it be thought that the Cloven Hoofs had shot me."

"Give your proof."

"Silent Sam, who was the man there with you, when I stopped on my westward run?"

"The prisoner there, Rocket Rob."

"Why was he there?"

"To kill and rob you, with my aid."

A hum went through the audience at this, and then Captain Starbuck asked:

"Is there a spy of the Cloven Hoofs in this camp, Silent Sam?"

"There is."

"Point him out."

"There—Rocket Rob, the Pony Rider!"

This produced a decided sensation, and then Captain Starbuck asked:

"Are Rocket Rob's two pards, Daring Dick and Phantom Phil, guilty with him?"

Amid breathless silence the answer came:

"They are not!"

"As another witness, I will call Black Diamond."

The negro stepped briskly forward, and Captain Starbuck put the question:

"Can you tell whether this man, Rocket Rob, left camp, yesterday?"

"He did leave camp, sah."

"When?"

"About two hours befo' Massa Buffalo Bill was a-leavin', sah."

"You saw him leave?"

"Yas, sah."

"Which way did he go?"

"He jist sneaked around the mountain, sah, same as if he was scoutin' arter Injuns."

"Did he go west?"

"Yas, sah?"

"When did he return?"

"Soon arter nightfall, sah."

"And then?"

"He went to bed, sah."

"Now, Daring Dick, I wish to ask if you knew that Rocket Rob left camp, as has been stated."

"I did."

"Did you know where he had gone?"

"Only what he told me."

"What was that?"

"He said he was going on the trail to see if Buffalo Bill was not in league with the Cloven Hoofs."

"What did he say upon his return?"

"He said simply that he was a d—d fool, and as we did not contradict him, there was no argument and he went to bed."

"Phantom Phil, you have heard the testimony of your comrade?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does he tell the truth?"

"Yes, sir, as I recollect what passed."

"Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard what the witnesses have said.

"Question the prisoner as you will, and it

is then for you to decide the verdict for or against him."

A few questions were asked the prisoner, but his answers were very weak, and when told to give his story he sat sullen and silent, except to say:

"Oh, I'm already sentenced to hang, so why waste breath denying the lies these men have told?"

Then, with quick impulse, he made a sudden leap, snatched a knife from the belt of Phantom Phil and was bringing it down with all his might upon Silent Sam, when his wrist was grasped with a force that he could not resist and the knife was wrenched from his hand.

"Well done, Buffalo Bill!" cried the captain, while cheers and applause burst from the crowd.

"You saved my life, Buffalo Bill!"

"I shall never forget you," said Silent Sam, and his hand trembled violently as he held it out to grasp the matchless Pony Rider's.

The jury were not long in deciding upon a verdict with such undoubted evidence of guilt before them, and when Captain Starbuck called upon them to say whether the prisoner was innocent or guilty, the answer came promptly and firmly:

"He is guilty!"

"What shall his sentence be?"

"Death."

Full a minute passed ere the silence was broken after their verdict and sentence were given; then the captain called upon Buffalo Bill to tell what he knew of Kit Kirby, the Danite, remarking:

"You start soon upon your ride, so we will hear your testimony now, and continue the trial after the arrival of Wild Bill."

The testimony of Buffalo Bill was soon given, and then the frontier court was adjourned to await the coming of Wild Bill Hickok.

CHAPTER LXIV.

A WOMAN'S CONFESSION.

WHEN the crowd gathered at the post, to see Wild Bill come in, they had not long to wait, for he was half an hour ahead of time, and reported having met with no delay going or coming.

"As you have half an hour, Buffalo Bill, and a delay in starting of as much more, which you can make up, I will call court at once and finish the trial, that you may make known at each station what we have done, and the fate of those we have found guilty," said Captain Starbuck.

Buffalo Bill bowed to the will of his commander, and the crowd assembled at once in the headquarter cabin.

The captain followed Buffalo Bill's testimony regarding his recognition of the Danite, and his duel with him at Silent Sam's cabin, by giving his history as he knew it, and asserting that he knew him to be Kit Kirby, the deserter, renegade, Mormon outlaw and all that was bad.

Then Wild Bill's testimony was given in his terse, sarcastic way, and the jury was told to question the prisoner.

He put in a general denial as to his identity and guilt, but the jury lost no time in pronouncing him guilty and sentencing him to death.

This done, court adjourned and a ringing cheer was given for Buffalo Bill as he mounted and started upon his run, just ten minutes late.

Again was he mounted upon Red Devil, and he was flying swiftly along when, as he entered Wolf Den Pass, he beheld a signal stick in the trail, as before.

He drew it out of the ground, unfolded the slip of paper and read:

"The King of the Cloven Hoofs will no longer be a terror to the Pony Riders.

"He is dead, and my hand took his life.

"Who he is, and who I am, matters not, now that he is dead. His band will soon be dispersed, and I will go my way, alone, through life.

"I tried hard to redeem him from a life of crime, but in vain. I did all in my power to save the Pony Riders from death, and my conscience upholds me in having done some little good in that direction.

"Would that I could have done more!

"On the door of Silent Sam's cabin you will find a map. Study it well, for it will lead you to the secret camp of the Cloven Hoofs."

"Attack at night, for they keep no guard, and lose no time, for all have been called in and are there."

"You will meet the patrol returning, so lead them against the Cloven Hoofs, and you and your comrades will no longer follow a fatal trail."

"Good-by."

"YOUR UNKNOWN GUIDE."

Buffalo Bill halted to read this quite astonishing letter, and he sat upon his horse with no idea how time was passing.

Over and over again he read the communication and confession, and, then, with a sigh, put spurs to his horse and dashed on his way again.

When he reached his first relay he took a man from there, according to the captain's orders, to Silent Sam's station.

Arriving at the latter relay, he found the door closed and locked, as he had left it; but upon the door was fastened a folded paper.

Taking it down he saw that it was a map. Thrusting it in his pocket, he mounted a fresh horse and pressed on, having told the man there that he would send him a comrade from the next station, where there were three stock-tenders.

This he did, and continuing on his run, he came upon the Pony Riders' Patrol returning.

He at once called Little Lone Star aside, and showing him the map, the two talked earnestly together for a few minutes; then Devil Dan was called and told to press on through with the Express pouches in place of Buffalo Bill.

Devil Dan at once started, and placing himself at the head of the Pony Riders' Guard, Buffalo Bill led them back on the trail a few miles, then branched off to the left, and just at sunset camped on the banks of a beautiful lake, many miles in length by a mile in width, and bordering on the base of a mountain.

Going into camp, the men were surprised to see Buffalo Bill throw off his saddle and then his clothing, then mount his horse and ride boldly into the lake, heading his horse straight for a little island, covered with timber, a few hundred feet from the shore.

In the moonlight they beheld him land on this island. Ten minutes later, there came the splash of heavy oars, and a large flat boat, built of hewn timbers, but large enough to carry a dozen horses, came into view, Buffalo Bill rowing it along.

Three hours after, by making two trips in the flat, the whole patrol had been landed at the base of the mountain.

Still acting as a guide, Buffalo Bill led them on into a canyon, that soon widened into a valley.

There they came upon a camp, while a couple of hundred fine horses were feeding in the valley.

With yells the Pony Riders' Patrol dashed upon the camp, when, from out of the log huts rushed frightened outlaws, a score in number.

A hot fight was begun. It was "give and take" on both sides, but the outlaws knew their ground; there were rocks and timber near, canyons and innumerable hiding places; and seeing half a dozen of their men go down before the fire of the furious riders, the Cloven Hoofs broke for cover and eluded all pursuit.

Not a wounded outlaw could be found; nor was a prisoner taken, from whom any information could be gleaned; hence, the Pony Riders' Patrol were compelled to content themselves with their victory and the capture of the retreat and the horses.

Camping there for the night, the next morning revealed nothing more, for the Cloven Hoofs had been scattered, the band broken up.

Burying the dead outlaws, the Pony Riders started homeward, carrying their own dead and wounded with them.

The victory had been won through following the directions of the Unknown Guide and protector of Buffalo Bill!

But the secret of how he got his information, for reasons of his own Buffalo Bill kept to himself.

When the Pony Riders' Patrol reached

Headquarters Ranch, they found a large crowd gathered at the post, though Devil Dan had arrived in safety some time before.

The cause of the crowd being there their eyes soon had revealed to them, as there swung in mid-air the dead forms of the Red Danite and Rocket Rob.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

It was a surprise to Captain Starbuck when Devil Dan arrived in Buffalo Bill's stead; but when he told how the latter had gone off at the head of the Pony Riders' Patrol the agent knew that his champion rider had some good cause for it.

When he heard the story Buffalo Bill had to tell he was more than rejoiced, and had a greater admiration than ever for his "best man."

The next day Buffalo Bill made his ride, and when he reached Valley Farm in the night he was glad to find that Gentleman George had gone out to guide Pony Bob across his bridge, and that Little Sunbeam was alone.

When asked by her why he had missed the run the day before, he handed her the letter of his mysterious guide and protector to read.

She turned pale as she read it, and then said slowly:

"He is dead then, and she has gone her way!"

"So let it be, for father and I can remain here as we have done in the past."

"Buffalo Bill, who the King of the Cloven Hoofs was I need not now reveal to you; but I will say this, that he held a secret that has crushed my father to the earth for years, for only through that man could father prove his innocence."

"It is impossible, now, and we must rest content."

"We came here hoping for justice, and for revenge, in good time. We have been avenged by his death, but justice we cannot get."

"Say nothing to father about it; I will tell him."

Just then Gentleman George came in with Pony Bob, when Buffalo Bill related all of the happenings at Headquarters Ranch. After this talk the Pony Riders had their supper and departed their separate ways.

Still remaining upon the Pony Express trail, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Pony Bob saw many an adventure, but with many a hair-breadth escape, and, as the Big Three, made history for years to come. Wild Bill at length fell at the hands of an assassin, but is still mourned by his two gallant pals who are still on the sunny side of the River of Death.

Long may they so remain!

THE END.

NEXT DIME LIBRARY, No. 852!

The Stranger Sport's Shake-up;

OR,

RED HOT RUBE'S RACKET AT RED BEND.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "KIRK KING, THE MAN FROM KIRBY," "GENTLEMAN DAVE, THE DEAD GAME SPORT," "THE KING PIN TRAMP," ETC.

Lively times at Red Bend—mighty lively times. What with a double trouble—outlaws waylaying coaches and people on the lone hill-trails, and their spies and other bad men in camp—the condition of affairs calls for a heavy hand and wariest wit. This comes in singular guise; and with the advent of the STRANGER SPORT begins a

Ruction with Rogues

that keeps the camp and vicinity in a tremor of suspense, excitement and mystery. The STRANGER SPORT, as if by merest chance, takes a hand in the game—the outlaws and people little suspecting his mission; while in the outlaw gang, as if one of their number, is yet a greater mystery, in whose unmasking we have a

Detective Chef d'Œuvre!

and the reader rejoices in having read one of the few stories of combined Wild West and detective life that gives unalloyed satisfaction. So don't miss the early copy of the "boss story" of the month!

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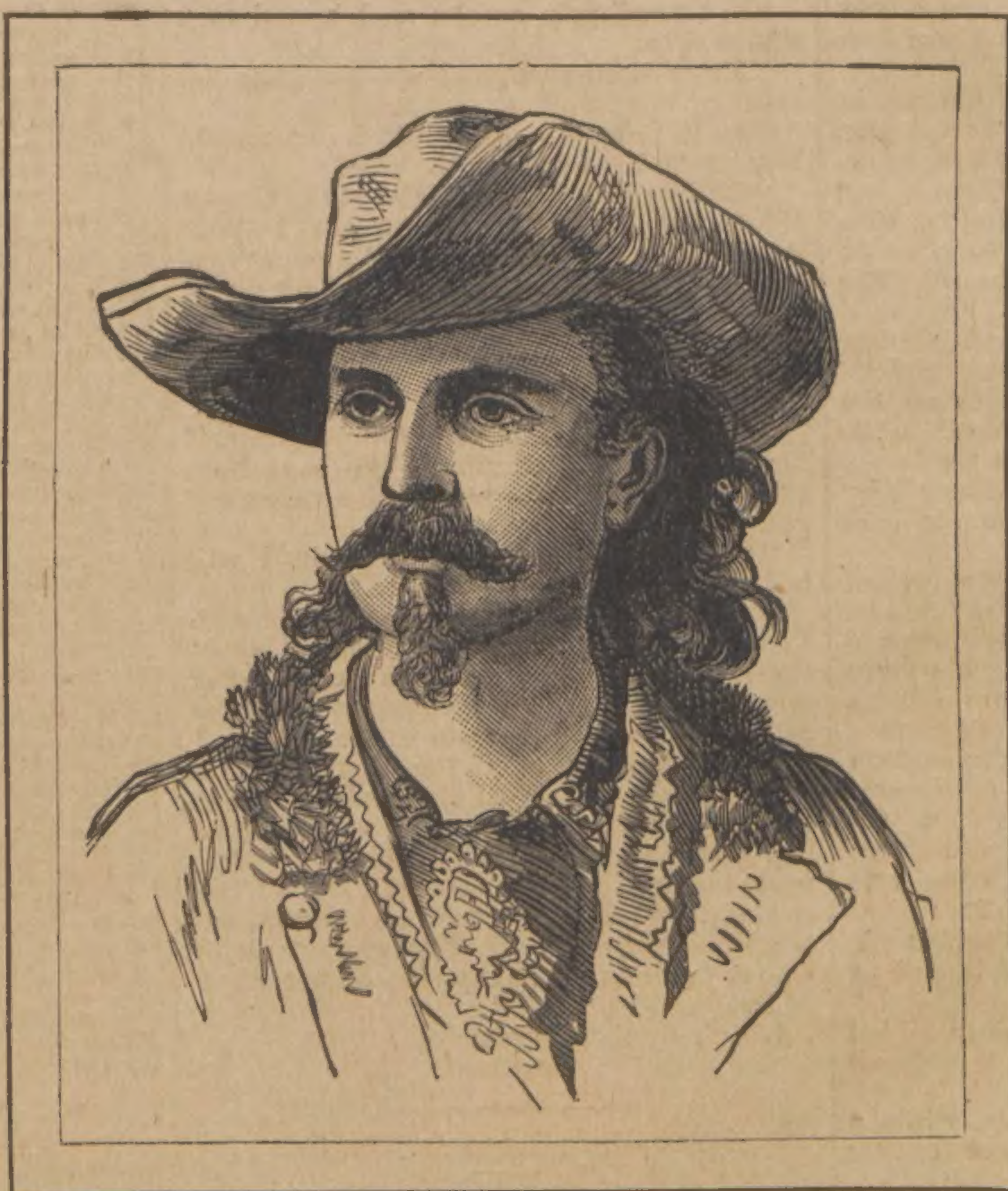
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